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THE RANCH GIRLS SERIES

The Ranch Girls' Pot of Gold

BOOKS BY MARGARET VANDERCOOK

THE RANCH GIRLS SERIES

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THE RANCH GIRLS' POT OF GOLD
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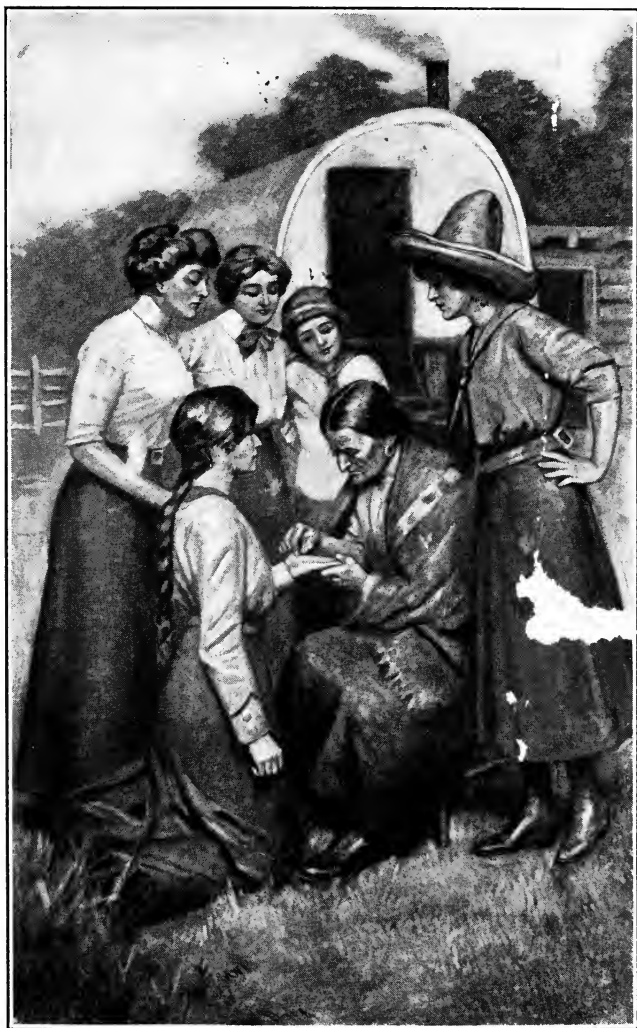
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THE OLD WOMAN MUMBLED A VERSE OF POETRY

THE RANCH GIRLS SERIES

The Ranch Girls' Pot of Gold

—BY—

MARGARET VANDERCOOK

ILLUSTRATED BY
HUGH A. BODINE

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The Ranch Girls' Pot of Gold

CHAPTER I

THE GYPSY CARAVAN

A HUNDRED dollars a month—it's a fortune!" Jean Bruce exclaimed gayly, pirouetting about on her tip-toes in front of a huge Japanese umbrella fastened upright in the ground in the middle of the orchard at the Rainbow Ranch.

Jacqueline Ralston gazed half convinced at the sheet of paper she held in her hand. She was sitting in Turkish fashion on the grass just outside the umbrella and, as her Mexican hat had been flung aside, the spring sun shone directly down on the bright bronze of her hair and warmed to a richer rose the brilliant color in her cheeks. The past few months had wrought little change in her, save that

the lifting of the clouds from about her home had left her more radiant and full of purpose than ever before.

"I don't know whether it is an opportunity or not," she answered dreamily. "What do you think, dears?" she inquired of a young woman who was watching the steam pour forth from a brass teakettle, and of a quiet, dark-haired girl who sat near by contentedly embroidering a square of linen.

Olive hesitated for a moment, looking toward their chaperon, but Ruth was too busy with the teakettle—which had chosen that moment to boil over—to have time to reply. "I know a hundred dollars a month does sound like a great deal of money," Olive agreed slowly, "but I wonder what the people are like who wish to rent our ranch. And where can we go if we give up our house to them?"

Jack shook her head uncertainly, but Jean flung out both arms in an imploring gesture, and a beseeching expression softened her merry brown eyes. "Where could we go? Why, haven't we the whole round world to choose from?" she demanded pleadingly. "And don't the very breezes call us to follow them in search of adventure? Oh, I can feel the

spring *Wanderlust* in my blood this very minute. Cousin Ruth, Jack, Olive, please agree with me or I can't bear it. Surely you must see that this letter from Mrs. Post's friends, who want Rainbow Lodge for the summer, is just heaven sent. We were dying to take a trip and now we can go everywhere—or just somewhere, I don't care where, because we have never been anywhere in our lives." And Jean paused only because she was out of breath and not because of the laughter that greeted her peculiar form of eloquence.

The three ranch girls and their chaperon, Ruth Drew, were having an impromptu tea party all to themselves in their miniature orchard on a lovely May day. Their fruit trees were not yet large enough for shade. Indeed, at the present time they looked like glorified bouquets set on tall, slender stalks, their branches were so small, so fragrant and so covered with delicate fairylike blossoms. The cherry and plum trees were in full bloom and the pink buds on the apple trees were slowly uncurling, while on every side the level prairie fields were carpeted with new grass that rippled softly under the low winds like the surface of a quiet sea.

"Girls, I don't want to be a wet blanket and I am afraid you will think *I am* a discouraging person," Ruth interposed, passing around her teacups, "but I don't believe we could do much traveling on a hundred dollars a month. I am awfully sorry, Jean, to disappoint you, but you must remember that railroad journeys are terribly expensive and we would have to board somewhere when we were not on trains."

"All right, Ruth," Jack assented, looking half relieved and half disappointed, as she folded up her letter. "I'll write to Mr. and Mrs. Harmon to-night and refuse their offer for the 'Lodge.'"

Jean sighed as though she had no further joy in living and Ruth shook her head. "No, Jack, don't write your letter quite yet," she advised. "Let's talk things over again before we finally decide. But I do wish Frieda would come with the cookies; it seems so hateful to have tea without her. I can't imagine what has kept her so long."

Tearing across the yard that divided the Lodge from the ranch orchard came a round, chubby girl, with her blond pigtails flying straight out behind her and her cheeks a bright red from excitement. She had a big

dish of gingercakes in her hands, but as she ran she scattered them behind her like little "Hop o' My Thumb" did his poor crumbs of bread.

"Oh, do come to the house quick! The most loveliest thing has happened!" she cried fervently. "A band of gypsies was traveling across the plains and they have stopped right at our house, and say that if we will give them some food and water they will tell all our fortunes. There is a man and a girl and an old woman and the cunningest baby!"

Frieda flung her small self on Jean, and without another word the two girls rushed off toward the house, while Ruth and Jack and Olive gathered up the despised tea things and followed them more slowly, munching the long desired cookies.

Drawn up near the back porch at Rainbow Lodge was a rickety old canvas-top wagon pulled by two ancient and sadly dilapidated horses, and seated in state at a table not far away were Frieda's band of gypsies being generously fed by Aunt Ellen.

Ruth and Olive walked toward their unexpected visitors, but Jack in her usual impetuous fashion ran up to the horses and began to take off their harness. "Uncle Zack, please

come here at once; these poor horses are nearly dead," she called quickly. "Some one will have to help me. I am afraid I can't look after them both, for they can scarcely stand up." But Uncle Zack, the old colored servant of the ranch house, was not within sound of Jack's voice and the girls were too much interested in the gypsies to heed her.

The old horses had great sagging places under their hips; the muscles beneath their worn coats quivered and jerked with fatigue; their eyes were bloodshot and their breath came in long, quivering sighs.

Jacqueline Ralston was a ranch girl who had been brought up to love horses since she was a tiny baby, and she cared for them so intensely that nothing stirred her like the sight of them ill used. Now, heedless of all else, she softly patted and talked to the two horses, lifting off a part of their ragged harness; then suddenly turning, discovered their gypsy driver calmly eating a comfortable dinner. Jack's eyes flashed and the hot blood surged to her cheeks.

"Come see to your horses," she ordered sharply. "What do you mean by resting and eating while your horses suffer? Even a tenderfoot knows better than to be so stupid

and good for nothing. I thought a gypsy had more sense." The young girl turned away her flushed face as she finished speaking, for a lump was rising in her throat, and she had seen the gypsy man get up from the table and start over toward her with his guitar swung jauntily over his shoulder and a supercilious smile on his lips.

"Don't worry about my horses, young lady," he remarked indifferently. "If they were worth anything I would look after them better, but they are worn-out old brutes and won't be fit for use much longer." Without any excuse the man gave the nearer horse a brutal kick that made it stagger with pain, and struck the other with the palm of his hand.

"By the way," he remarked, "I'm not a gypsy, as you suppose, though I happen to be married to one and running this particular outfit."

Jack saw everything spin around for half a second—she was so angry with the man for his cruelty—but she managed to speak with dignity. "If you do another unkind thing to your horses I shall ask our overseer, Jim Colter, to make you leave our ranch," she declared firmly. "Of course I see, now you

are nearer, that you are not a gypsy." Jack frowned, puzzled by the tramp's unusual appearance. His hair was light brown, his eyes blue and his features refined and delicate, although his expression was crafty and his mouth weak and selfish. Oddly enough, in spite of his unkempt clothing, it was plain he had been born a gentleman.

Abruptly changing his careless manner the man took off his hat to Jack. "I am sorry to have offended you," he remarked politely. "I ought to know better. Is Jim Colter the overseer of your ranch? I have heard of him often, but in all the years I have spent in this country I have never met him. I came west to locate a gold mine, but instead of my finding one these gypsy women found me starving in the desert and took care of me. So I married the girl and we travel around in their wagon; it's easier than walking. I have been prospecting for gold in this region lately. Would you let me have a look over your ranch before I move on? You may be grazing your cattle above a gold mine this minute—it's what the old man did who once owned Cripple Creek."

The man's eyes glowed with the peculiar fanatical glow of the gold-seeker and Jack

felt a thrill of excitement as she watched him, but she shook her head sensibly. And at this moment Jim Colter appeared strolling along the path toward them from the stables back of the Lodge. His hands were in his pockets and he was whistling cheerfully, with an inquiring expression in his friendly blue eyes. The newcomer did not see him.

"Want any help with your animals, stranger?" Jim inquired hospitably, as he came over to where Jack and her companion were standing.

The other man swung slowly around at the sound of a new voice.

Without replying he stared; stared at Jim so long that Jack wondered what had happened to keep him from answering. Then she glanced at Jim—he was behaving as strangely as their visitor; his jaw had dropped and his eyes darkened, and if it had been anybody but Jim Colter, Jack might have thought the overseer of the Rainbow Ranch frightened.

"Is your name Jim Colter?" the new man inquired curiously. "I think I have seen you before, yet I don't recollect your name. I'm Joe Dawson; 'Gypsy Joe' is what I'm called out here. Funny name for a man

who once hailed from one of the first families in 'Ole Virginie.'"

Jim picked up a bucket of water from the ground, in order to gain time. "Suppose you join the other girls now, Jack," he suggested mildly. "It may be this stranger and I have met before and will have a few questions to ask one another. Anyhow, I think the girls need you with them."

Jack moved off obediently and discovered Olive having her fortune told. She was kneeling before the old gypsy with one hand resting in the woman's wrinkled palm.

"You are not one of these little missies. You are of another brood and another fortune," the old crone announced calmly. "I don't say I am able to place you, but you don't rightly belong here."

Olive's cheeks flushed indignantly and she dropped her lids quickly over her surprised eyes. "I don't see why you think I am different from the others. I *am* one of the ranch girls," she exclaimed earnestly.

The fortune teller smiled and lightly ran one aged finger around the line of Olive's delicately pointed chin and about her long, almond-shaped black eyes. "I don't *think* you are different, child; I *know* it," she re-

plied sternly. "It ain't no use to try to deceive me. I can see, too, that life ain't going to be a bed of roses for you. Some one is standing near us right now who is going to exercise a strong influence over your fate. Many times she will help you to happiness, but once she will cause you great sorrow. She may never know it, for you will never tell her, but remember—I warn you—'years alone will wipe away your tears.'"

The gypsy lifted her small, black, haunting eyes with as calm an assurance as though she had been one of the three ancient sisters of fate and stared long and imperiously at Jacqueline Ralston. Jack bit her lips and returned the woman's gaze steadfastly.

"If you mean that I shall ever bring sorrow upon my friend, you are very much mistaken," she protested defiantly, putting her arm lovingly about Olive. "If you intend to make up such hateful and untrue stories you shan't tell any more of her fortune."

But the gypsy gave not the slightest heed to Jack's remonstrance; making a weird sign across the palm of Olive's hand the old woman mumbled a verse of poetry, the girls straining forward to hear:

“ ‘Criss, cross, shadow and loss;
Shrouded in mystery,
The first of your history!
Here there is light, there dark once again.
Happiness comes, but after it pain—
Yet your name shall be found and a fortune untold
Shall make for your feet a rich pathway of gold.’ ”

Olive smiled tremulously, drawing away her hand. “I don’t believe I care to have my future foretold in poetry,” she protested. “Won’t you tell Miss Ralston hers? Perhaps you may give her a better fate.”

The fortune teller did not like the scornful curve to Jack’s full red lips nor the doubting, half-amused expression of her eyes. The woman had recognized at once that this girl was not to be so easily influenced as gentle Olive, nor as merry Jean, nor as the littlest maiden with the two blond pigtailed. She was even more difficult than the oldest girl of them all, for Ruth had made no effort to conceal her surprise at the queer jumble of truth and fiction that had come forth in the account of Olive’s history.

Obediently Jack put forth her strong, shapely hand, but the woman did not touch it, although her shrewd, half-closed eyes never wandered from the girl’s face.

"Be on your guard. You don't wish other people to do anything for you," the gypsy spoke low and warningly. "I know you like to help them, but you are too proud to want to be helped. Some day something you little expect is going to happen to you that will make you have to depend on other people for a long, long time." All at once the woman's harsh manner changed and she gazed at her listener more kindly. "You are fond of this ranch and would like to spend your whole life on it, wouldn't you?" she questioned keenly.

Silently Jack bowed her head.

"You won't," the fortune teller went on solemnly; "you will travel over a great part of the world and you may settle in a strange land. Anyhow, I can see that you'll marry and have sons and——"

Jack blushed resentfully and the gypsy's beady eyes twinkled, for she was a good enough judge of character to guess the elder Miss Ralston's views on matrimony, merely by observing her pride and reserve. It was true that Jack had vowed to the other girls a hundred times that nothing and nobody could induce *her* to marry; *she* had more important things to do.

"Dear me, granny, haven't you something

pleasant to tell somebody?" Jean interposed, coming forward for her turn in the game.

The gypsy frowned severely. "I can tell only the truth," she protested in an important tone. "But you need not worry yet about your future, young lady, for you don't take things so seriously as these other two girls. Life is more of a joke to you; only see that you don't carry your joking too far."

Jean pouted, jerking away her hand, and Ruth, who was particularly fond of Jean, interrupted the old crone. "Tell our smallest girl's future now, auntie; she is sure to have only good luck," she interceded.

The gammer smiled. Frieda had taken the gypsy girl's baby and was cuddling it like a wax doll, its tiny birdlike face contrasting oddly with her pretty plumpness.

"The youngest lady shall have a fortune like an apple pie, it shall be so trim and neat and nice and good to look at and to taste, with plenty of sugar and kisses in it," the old woman chuckled good naturedly, glancing kindly at happy Frieda.

Ruth turned quickly around and smiled. At this moment Jim Colter came stalking across the yard toward them, with the strange gypsy at his heels, and Ruth supposed he

wished to hear the girls' fortunes. But Jim did not appear interested and looked at Ruth so queerly that she was afraid he was angry.

"Shall I tell you your future now, Miss?" the gypsy woman demanded slyly, talking to Ruth, but discerning all of Jim's six feet of shyness and troubled emotion at the same time. "I can see a great change coming in your life, Miss," the fortune teller went on quickly. "You can feel it stirring in you now, but you won't give up to it. You are going to take a long trip and you are going to——"

Whatever the gypsy meant to say Ruth did not wish to hear, so she remarked quickly: "Please don't tell me anything of my fate. I—I don't like to have my fortune told," she explained, blushing furiously. She felt angry with herself for her absurdity, as Jim was gazing directly at her across the circle of listening girls.

"I believe you have told us all quite enough of our futures, granny," Ruth announced. "We are going to leave you to rest," and she beckoned to the ranch girls to follow her indoors.

Jim watched them until the last fluttering petticoat disappeared. Then he and "Gypsy

Joe" walked away from the house together. A few hours later, just before dusk, the ranch girls were in the big living room of the Lodge, waiting for Ruth to come in and for Aunt Ellen to bring in supper, when there was a sound of wagon wheels along the road that led away from the house to the trail across the ranch. Jean danced to the open window and signaled to Jack.

The gypsy caravan was rolling slowly toward the distant plains. A delicate purple mist hung over the world and the wagon seemed to float along in the soft evening air; a single star shone over the travelers.

Jean pinched Jack's arm until she gave a cry of pain. "What is it, Jean?" Jack inquired anxiously, for she could see that her cousin's expression was curiously grave and that her eyes were shining and her lips trembling with eagerness.

"Oh, Olive, Frieda, do come here and look," Jean called pleadingly.

Olive slipped her hand in Jack's and Frieda put her arm about Jean's waist while the four girls stood gazing wonderingly at the moving wagon, toward which Jean was pointing with a prophetic finger.

"Girls, there goes our way to see the

world," Jean murmured quietly. "There is the kind of private car I would rather ride in than any other in the world, and we own one already."

"What is the matter, Jean; what are you talking about?" Jack queried quickly, for she could see that Jean was not joking, but was deeply in earnest.

"I mean that if we rent Rainbow Lodge this summer we can travel about in a caravan," Jean returned dreamily. "We can drive over miles and miles of our beautiful prairies and see the great canyons and forests; and may even be able to go as far as the Yellowstone Park. You know we have the wagon and plenty of horses already, and with a hundred dollars a month—why, we can feed on nectar and ambrosia! Wouldn't you just adore a caravan trip, girls?" She paused wistfully.

"O Jean!" the three other ranch girls gasped in happy chorus as the full rapture of her suggestion swept over them.

"Shsh!" That young lady put a warning finger to her lips. "Here comes Cousin Ruth; don't say anything to her yet. Goodness only knows how we will be able to make her and Jim agree to our beautiful plan!"

CHAPTER II

THE SPELL OF THE MOON

THE moon rose early and before dinner was over its pale crescent appeared overhead.

The ranch girls were unusually restless. Jean especially was like a will-o'-the-wisp, never still for an instant. "Do let's go out for a walk; I feel as if I should stifle indoors," she begged.

"Isn't it too cool?" Ruth objected faintly. "Remember how great a change always comes here at night, no matter how warm the days have been. I should think the sudden coolness in the evening would be awfully trying for travelers on the prairies."

Jean cast a tragic glance at their chaperon. "Oh, no, Cousin Ruth, I assure you the nights on the plains are simply glorious! You just can't imagine how wonderful it is in the summer time, after the hot days, to feel the delicious cool breezes spring up and blow softly over you, while you lie out in the

darkness facing the stars," she ended breathlessly.

Ruth laughed and slipped on her coat. "You talk like a tramp, Jean, dear. When have you ever spent your days and nights out of doors?" she queried.

"Oh, lots of times. When Jack and I were little girls uncle used to take us camping with him," Jean answered indifferently, not daring to trust herself to glance at the other girls.

The night was delicious and Jean's and Frieda's violet beds near Rainbow Lodge were adding an unaccustomed fragrance to the desert air.

"Let's walk down to the rancho. I should like to ask Jim why he sent those gypsies away so soon this afternoon, even before their horses had time to rest," Jack proposed carelessly.

Jean and Jack each slipped a hand in Ruth's, as they set out for their stroll, for she was far more timid than any one of the ranch girls; and Olive and Frieda followed close behind. Near the rancho, where Jim and the cowboys lived, a sound of singing and the low scrape of a fiddle, greeted them.

Jack put her fingers to her lips and gave

their familiar whistle, but Jim did not answer; then Jean joined in, and the four girls finally whistled in unison.

A man's figure appeared at the front door of the rancho. He was one of the cowboys, who explained that Jim had disappeared immediately after dinner without a word to anyone and no one knew where he had gone nor when he meant to return.

On their way back to the Lodge Ruth happened to glance idly across one of the near-by alfalfa fields and saw the figures of two men plainly silhouetted against the horizon. One of them she recognized as Jim Colter.

"There is Mr. Colter over there talking to some one, girls," Ruth declared.

"Then let's walk over in his direction. Jim will soon see us coming and join us," Jack suggested.

But Jim apparently did not see the girls approaching him, he was so deeply engaged in conversation. Once he raised his arm as though he meant to strike the man with him, but a moment later his arm dropped limply at his side. Frieda laughed aloud, for the two black shadows looked like huge dolls.

"I think we had better turn toward home, children," Ruth proposed hurriedly. "I don't

believe Mr. Colter is going to look toward us and I don't think he will want to be interrupted if he does." But at this moment the man with Jim slipped quietly away in the darkness and Jim strode forward to Ruth and the ranch girls. It was impossible to see his face clearly, but it was evident there was something most unusual in his bearing—a subtle change that could be felt rather than seen.

"What are you doing, Miss Drew, wandering around at this hour of the night with the girls? I am surprised at you," Jim said harshly. "There is no telling what danger you may get into." Jim's voice was so hot with anger and impatience that his audience was silent from sheer amazement. It was impossible to believe that he was speaking to Ruth in such a fashion, when always before he had treated her as a queen who could do no wrong.

Ruth was glad of the darkness, for her cheeks were flushing and her heart beat unevenly. For a moment the tears gathered in her eyes, but they were blinked back indignantly. Why should she care because the overseer of the ranch was rude to her? She had always believed that Jim Colter was not

a gentleman and now felt sure of it. But why did not this conviction make her able to answer Jim as he deserved, and why should she feel so unhappy? Ruth knew in her heart of hearts that she was not being honest with herself. In her six months in the West she and Jim had become good friends. There were other standards of life than those of her school teaching days in Vermont. Pretend as she would, a man could be a gentleman and yet wear strange clothes and use queer English. But that Jim could fail in any other particular Ruth had not believed possible until now.

Jean and Jack were as bewildered as their chaperon. For some time they had suspected that Jim was more interested in Ruth than he would let them know. Certainly the poor fellow was doing his best to improve his English, for Jean had dived into his coat pocket one day in search of the mail and had brought forth instead a discarded English grammar which Jim had been studying surreptitiously.

"Why Jim, how silly you are!" Jack exclaimed at last to relieve the painful silence. "Why do you mind our taking a walk to-night? You know we often do, and we haven't

been far. There is nothing that could happen to us."

Frieda slipped her soft little hand inside Jim's big, strong one, and he strode on ahead with her and Olive. "Don't you ever be too sure of not getting into mischief, Jack Ralston," he called back.

"We only went to the rancho to look for you, Jim," Jack replied lightly. "I wanted to ask you why you sent those gypsies away from the ranch so soon this afternoon. I didn't care about the people and I hated the man, but the poor horses were so tired I thought you would let them stay all night so the horses could rest."

"Miss Ralston, am I running this ranch, or are you?" Jim demanded angrily. "When I see a pack of tramps getting ready to take up their residence with us, have I the right to send them away, or must I ask your leave?" The overseer's tone was wrathful. He knew just how angry Ruth was with him and now Jack would be equally offended; but fate had played Jim Colter such a strange trick in the last few hours that he did not care what he said or did.

Frieda's surprised "Oh!" was the first word spoken. A few seconds later Jack faltered,

"I am sure I beg your pardon, Jim; I didn't mean to question your right to do whatever you think best." Jack's voice trailed off brokenly and Ruth gave her an indignant and sympathetic squeeze. Jean slipped around on the other side of Jack, and if Jim could have been injured by burning glances he must have perished on the spot, for Jean's brown eyes and Ruth's darted flashes of lightning at his broad back.

At the Lodge door Jack slipped away from the others. Jim saw her start and made a step toward her, but before he could speak she had vanished, with Olive following her. Neither Ruth nor Jean would ask Jim to be seated, and Frieda was too sleepy to think, yet Jim lingered calmly on the porch. "Don't you think we had better go indoors? It's fairly cool," he said at length.

Ruth drew her coat closer about her and sank into a chair. "No, I don't care to go in," she replied coldly. Jean took Frieda's hand and faced Jim boldly. "Jim-Colter, there is something the matter with you to-night," she said. "I don't know what it is, but you were rude to Cousin Ruth and horrid to Jack, and if I were in their places I wouldn't speak to you."

The light from the big porch lantern shone full on Jim's strong, sun-tanned face. Jean and Ruth were both surprised at the change in his expression, for suddenly he looked like a repentant boy. "I say, Jean, do tell Jack for me that I am awfully sorry I was such a beast to her to-night," he pleaded. "Tell her I really didn't think for a minute that she meant any interference by her question. I was a bit upset and I——"

Jean shook her head severely. "I shall not apologize to Jack for you, Jim Colter, so you just needn't ask me," she answered cruelly. "You were a wretch to her and you've hurt her feelings dreadfully. You can do your own apologizing."

"But I won't see Jack again to-night, Jean, and I can't have her go to bed thinking hardly of me," Jim expostulated.

Jean glanced up at him demurely. She was an artful young person and it had just occurred to her that it might be a good idea to get Mr. Colter under her thumb by doing him a favor. She had not been able to speak to Ruth and Jim of her plan for the summer that evening, but she was only awaiting an opportunity.

"If I make up with Jack for you, Jim,

will you promise to listen to something we have to tell you in the morning and not say it is utterly impossible before you even *know* what it is?" Jean demanded.

Jim groaned, though his eyes twinkled. "Go to bed, Jean Bruce. I'll not make you any rash promise, for there is no telling what you mean to let me in for," he answered.

Jean gave her head a toss. "Oh, very well, Jim; just as you like," she agreed suavely. "Only I suppose you saw poor Jack was crying when she went indoors, and she doesn't cry once in a thousand years, so I am sure she will have a headache in the morning and not be able to speak to you."

"I surrender, Jean," Jim replied meekly, holding up both hands. "I will listen to anything you have to say in the morning if you will make my peace with Jack to-night. I must have hurt her feelings if she was crying, for I have seen her nearly kill herself a dozen times and never shed a tear."

The last of Mr. Colter's speech was addressed to Miss Drew alone, for Jean, having gotten her own way, had hurried Frieda off to bed.

Jim sank down comfortably on the porch steps and took off his big Stetson, as though

he did not mean to leave just yet. Ruth yawned openly once or twice, but still her guest showed no intention of going. She frowned at him coldly, but he was not looking at her.

Jim had sent an emissary to make his peace with Jack; but he had made no pretense of apologizing to her, and every bit of Ruth's New England pride was up in arms. Yet there was no doubt that Jim did look very handsome as he lingered on the steps in the moonlight. Ruth tried to convince herself that it was only his western costume that was picturesque, the soft shirt with the loose handkerchief knotted at the throat.

"I don't want you to think, Miss Drew, that Jack and I have ever quarreled before about who was the boss of this ranch," Jim explained regretfully. "To tell you the truth, I am a good deal worried about something and it has turned me into a bear." Jim rose up, smiling gently at Ruth. "I expect I had better be going," he said. "I am sorry I was rude to you too to-night, but I will wear sackcloth and ashes with pleasure to-morrow if you will only forgive me, and I can find them anyways handy about the ranch." Jim laughed and bent over, sud-

denly taking Ruth's hand in his to say good night, and she could but wonder if it was because he was so big and strong that he held it in such a tight grip.

CHAPTER III

CAUGHT IN THE TRAP

JEAN and Jack and Olive were cantering slowly through the fields about an hour before breakfast the next morning. The spring air was so delicious that they had not been able to resist it. Jack had waked before dawn and had kept quite still to listen to the silvery song of the wood thrush outside her bedroom window; she had not wished to go to sleep again, for her mind was too busy with Jean's plan for their summer holiday. When daylight came Jean was aroused by the noise of Jack's movements in the room, and opened her eyes to find her cousin slipping into her riding clothes. She too was eager for a ride, and when they softly called to Olive to join them the three girls stole out together.

"Jack, you will have to broach the subject of our caravan trip to Jim to-day; I am sure you will be all powerful," Jean suggested, as soon as they were fairly on their way. "The

more I am out of doors the more I think of how utterly rapturous it will be to spend our summer in traveling around and camping wherever we like. Tell Olive and me something about the people who want to rent our ranch, Jack," Jean ended curiously.

Jack shook her head slowly. "I am afraid I don't know very much about them, Jean," she answered. "Mr. and Mrs. Harmon are New York people; he is a stock broker and they are friends of Mrs. Post's and Laura's. Aunt Sallie does not know them personally, but she says they have one son and a daughter. The daughter is lame and an invalid; I believe they want to bring her out west to see what the climate will do for her." Jack gave an unconscious shudder of horror and sympathy and touched her pony lightly with her whip. The girls were galloping over a part of the ranch that was carpeted with wild prairie roses.

"Where are we going, Jack?" Olive queried, riding close beside her.

"If you and Jean don't mind, Olive, we are going over on the other side of Rainbow Creek," Jack replied apologetically. "Jim and one of the men set a trap over there yesterday to catch some animal that has been

worrying our sheep. You know I don't mind when the poor thieves are killed outright for their bad behavior, but sometimes they catch their legs in the traps and nearly pull them off." Jack flushed, but neither Jean nor Olive smiled at her; they knew that she was like a boy in many ways and was too good a sportsman to want anything to suffer unnecessarily.

The girls crossed the creek at a spot where the water was lowest; the spring rains had fallen and it was quite deep in many places. They rode in silence along the familiar path that followed the creek bed, each, in her own way, yielding her senses to the influence of the enchantment that the rare summer morning had created.

Click! click! A curious noise came from somewhere farther down the bed of the creek; it seemed to sound from behind a huge rock that rose up alongside the stream and split into a small ravine. Click! click! The sound was repeated.

Jack reined in her pony so suddenly that Jean almost ran into her. "What was that?" Jack asked quickly, but Jean put her finger cautiously to her lips and signaled for silence.

Click! click! click! The echo was louder

and more puzzling, and Jack slid softly off her horse, threw the reins to Olive and crept along the path until she came to the far side of the great rock. The noise was more distinct, but still she could see nothing; then she clambered up the rock and peered over. A man stood with a little hammer in his hand, chipping out small pieces of stone; a big pan filled with sand and gravel and water from Rainbow Creek was resting on the ground by his side.

A little murmur of surprise escaped Jack, and the intruder glanced up at her; he had been so intent on his work and so sure of not being discovered at that hour of the morning that he had not been disturbed by Jack's approach.

"So it is you, is it?" he said calmly. "I hope you don't mind my having a few pieces of these rocks as a souvenir of my visit to your ranch. I know you and your overseer objected to my prospecting for gold about here. That is the reason I pretended to drive away last night."

Jack at once recognized the speaker as the driver of the gypsy caravan of the day before. "I don't see how I am going to prevent your having the stones and pebbles now that

you have already taken possession of them," she answered indifferently. "But please don't let our overseer find you lurking about, or he will be dreadfully angry."

The stranger laughed and shrugged his shoulders carelessly, and Jack noticed that he seemed very sure of himself. "Oh, don't you worry about John, Jim Colter I mean," he returned coolly. "I am not afraid of him, though I won't trouble you any more than I can help."

"Did you ask the man if he found any signs of gold in our creek, Jack?" Jean demanded eagerly, as the three girls rode off together again.

Jack shook her head. "No, silly, of course I didn't," she replied. "There are lots of people out west who are crazy about finding gold. Don't you suppose if there had been any gold on our ranch father would have made the discovery years ago?"

"I don't know," Jean returned quietly. "But you might have asked just the same."

Jim had set his animal trap in some thick underbrush and covered it with twigs and evergreens, but Jack remembered the exact spot, and the girls now rode directly toward it. Jack carried her rifle with her, for if

they found an animal that had been caught and not killed she intended to put it out of its misery.

Within a short distance of the trap, but before the girls could see it, they heard a queer moaning that made them turn pale. The cry was not like a child's and not like an animal's; it was a queer combination of both.

Jean stopped her pony instantly. "I sha'n't go on any farther with you, Jack," she declared resolutely. "Jim has caught something in that wretched trap of his and it is suffering horribly. It won't do any good for me to see it. Olive, please you go on with Jack; I simply can't, I am such a wretched coward."

Olive and Jack both looked rather miserable at the prospect ahead of them, but Jack would not turn back and Olive would not desert her. By this time the strange sobbing had ceased and there was no further sound of movement or struggle in the neighborhood of the snare until the two girls rode up in plain sight of it.

"Good gracious, Olive, what is that?" Jack called quickly, almost falling from her horse in her amazement.

Instead of discovering a wild animal star-

ing at them with ferocious, frightened eyes, the riders spied a small, brown figure crouched on the ground in front of the wicked steel cage, as mute and motionless as a hare when first startled by a hunter. The boy's back was turned to Olive and Jack and he would not condescend even to look around at his captors.

Jack guessed at once what had happened. The child must have been starving, for he had thrust his arm inside the opening of the trap for the bait that had been put inside, and the spring had closed on his arm. Both girls ran toward him, but Jack did not hear Olive's quick exclamation. Fortunately she knew the trick of opening the trap, for the moment the wires released their cruel hold on the boy, he fainted quietly in Olive's outstretched arms. He was about ten or twelve years old, incredibly thin, with coal-black hair that fell in straight lines to his shoulders, strange, dark eyes with the look of far places in them, and a skin the color of burnished copper.

"It is Carlos, little Carlos!" Olive exclaimed wonderingly. "Jack, don't you remember my telling you about the Indian boy who helped me to come home to you when

I was stolen by old Laska? I wonder how in the world he has managed to find us."

Jack did not wait to answer Olive. Running at once to the creek for water, she signaled Jean to join them, and together the girls bathed the boy's face until he returned to consciousness.

Then Carlos calmly explained to Olive that he always had meant to find her some day. With her image ever before him and the names of the Ralston girls and the Rainbow Ranch ever sounding in his ears, the lad had remained quietly in the desert with his own people until the coming of spring. When the nomad tribe started south, Carlos had journeyed with them until they again struck camp, then he had traveled on alone, asking hundreds of questions and covering more miles than he was able to count. Unconscious of the fact he had come at length within the limits of Rainbow Ranch, and when he most needed her, Olive, like a good angel, had appeared to him. Yet Carlos took her coming calmly. Miracles are every-day occurrences to the Indian. Wiser than the wisest of us, he knows that, in spite of all the explanations of science, the rising and the setting of the sun, the life of a flower,

most of the things he sees in his world, are nature's miracles. So the miracle of Olive's discovery seemed to Carlos only another mysterious gift from the unknown Father.

Scorning to have his wounded arm bandaged, the boy soon started homeward with the girls. Jim and Frieda were waiting in front of the Lodge for them to return to breakfast. Jim laughed and Frieda stared when they beheld four figures on horseback instead of three.

"Well, Jack, who is your latest find?" Jim called out cheerfully, waving his hand to Jack in token of peace and good fellowship.

The horses stopped, and the Indian boy slid off from behind Olive's saddle and stood erect, facing Jim squarely. "I am Carlos, of the tribe of the Blackfeet," he answered proudly. "Are you the Big Chief of this ranch?"

Jim Colter shook his head gravely, although his eyes were smiling. "No, I am Big Chief of nothing, sonnie," he replied kindly. "But you had better come into the house with me; that is an uncommonly ugly wound you have on your arm, and I've an idea you might be persuaded to eat a little something."

CHAPTER IV

THE WAY TO ARCADY

IT can't be, Jim, that you think maybe we will be able to carry out our scheme," Jean murmured, her voice hushed almost into a whisper from sheer surprise. She held her fork in the air, hovering between her mouth and her plate, while the other three girls leaned back limply in their chairs at the breakfast table. To win a battle without a fight when all your forces are drawn up for action is unsettling.

"Oh, well, I didn't exactly say I would agree to this caravan trip," Jim hedged. "I don't know that it is a good plan for you to give up your home and take to the woods; but I did say that the idea was worth considering if Miss Ruth favors it. The thing that troubles me most is who is to be the leader of this female cavalcade?" Jim frowned and buttered his fourth hot biscuit. "Don't tell me, Jack Ralston, that you can go it alone, for you can't. It is a good thing

you were born in Wyoming, the first state to declare for woman's suffrage, for if ever I met a real natural born female suffragette, it's you. There isn't a thing on this earth that a man does that you wouldn't try if you could. I don't know, Miss Drew, but that we are a little more advanced on the woman question out here than you are in Vermont," Jim drawled slowly. "Kind of seems like it ought to help reconcile you to living among us."

Ruth laughed girlishly. She had on a white piqué frock and looked as dainty as a Dresden china shepherdess; she had plenty of color now and her lips had lost their disapproving curve. "I don't need the vote to reconcile me to living with the ranch girls, Mr. Colter," she insisted sweetly. "And please understand I am just as anxious for the caravan trip as I can be."

Jim looked thoughtfully at his plate without answering, until Jack gave a little tug at his sleeve. "See here, Jim, dear," she argued quickly, "even I haven't suggested that we undertake our trip without a man for our guide. You know we want to follow one of the old, almost forgotten trails across the state to the Yehowstone Park, and of course

we don't want to get lost; but Jean and Olive and I planned the whole thing out this morning just perfectly. We know some of the horses we want to take with us and we have chosen the very man for our escort."

Jim shook his head obstinately. "You know I am not talking against the boys on our ranch," he answered solemnly; "they are as good a set of fellows as can be found anywhere in the business. But there isn't one of them that's fit to trust with the finest girls in this country."

"Oh, our guide is all right; don't worry about him, Jim," Jean announced, with the calm assurance of a priestess of the Delphic oracle. "I know you will thoroughly approve of him as soon as you hear who he is." Jean tried her best to wink at Ruth, so that she might guess their meaning, but Ruth was completely in the dark.

"I am pretty sure *not* to approve of him, you mean," Jim interrupted gloomily. "I have thought of every man on the place, and there isn't one of them I would even consider."

"Oh, yes, there is one, Jim; just one, and you haven't thought of him yet," Jack argued unhesitatingly.

Frieda snickered, Olive smiled and Jean shrugged her shoulders, but Ruth looked as puzzled as Jim.

"Well, out with your man's name, children," Jim demanded firmly. "You must not set your heart on this excursion until I know who *he* is. I am sorry now that I ever listened to your scheme."

Jean, who was sitting next Ruth, leaned over and whispered something to her, and Ruth gave a happy laugh and then blushed furiously without rhyme or reason.

"Jim, there is but one person in the world we want to go with us, and you certainly ought to know who he is," Jack suggested at this moment. "Surely you know that it's you. Of course it couldn't be anyone else."

"Me—me!" Jim Colter exclaimed helplessly, the tired, thoughtful expression which his brown face had worn all morning changing suddenly to one of joy at Jack's proposition. "Why, you are mad as a March hare, Miss Ralston. I know you thought of renting Rainbow Lodge for the magnificent sum of one hundred dollars a month, but I took it that bargain did not include a thousand or more acres of good Wyoming land, and I

would like to know who would look after the ranch while I was away."

"Oh, Jim, you are tiresome," Jean protested. "Do you think the ranch would go to rack and ruin if you left it for a little while? You know one of the other men could take charge of things for you. Why, you haven't taken a holiday from this place in *years*, and when you went away last time I suppose it was business, for you never said where you went nor what happened to you while you were away."

Jim's face turned so red that Jack was afraid Jean's idle speech had hurt his feelings, for he probably did not like the idea that they thought anyone as capable of running their ranch for them as he was. She slipped away from her place at the table and put her arm over Jim's shoulder as simply as though she were six instead of sixteen. Jim had always been a kind of big brother to the ranch girls. "Dear old Jim," Jack whispered affectionately, "don't be offended. Of course, Jean does not mean that anybody can really manage the ranch except you, but she does think, and indeed we all do—Cousin Ruth most of all, though she hasn't said anything yet—that you could come away with us for

a while, even if you just take the trip with us to Yellowstone Park and then return to the ranch as you think best. O, Jim!" Jack's words tripped over each other in her eagerness, "you know you would love our caravan excursion better than anything in the world! It was just because you knew how much you would adore it yourself that you agreed so readily to our scheme when we proposed it to you. Don't you remember how we used to plot and plan just such a journey years and years ago, when Jean and Frieda and I were little girls? You used to tell us stories about your long ride all alone across the great desert when you had no one but your horse for company, no money, no friends, and no place to go until you found us." Jack paused for an instant.

Jim Colter was looking out the window, but his eyes were not on the landscape before him.

"Don't you recall, Jim, how you said that even then you learned to love the romance of the silent places, even the great loneliness that made you feel as though the world were created just for you?" Jack went on pleadingly. "And you said that some day you would take us for a trip across the prairies,

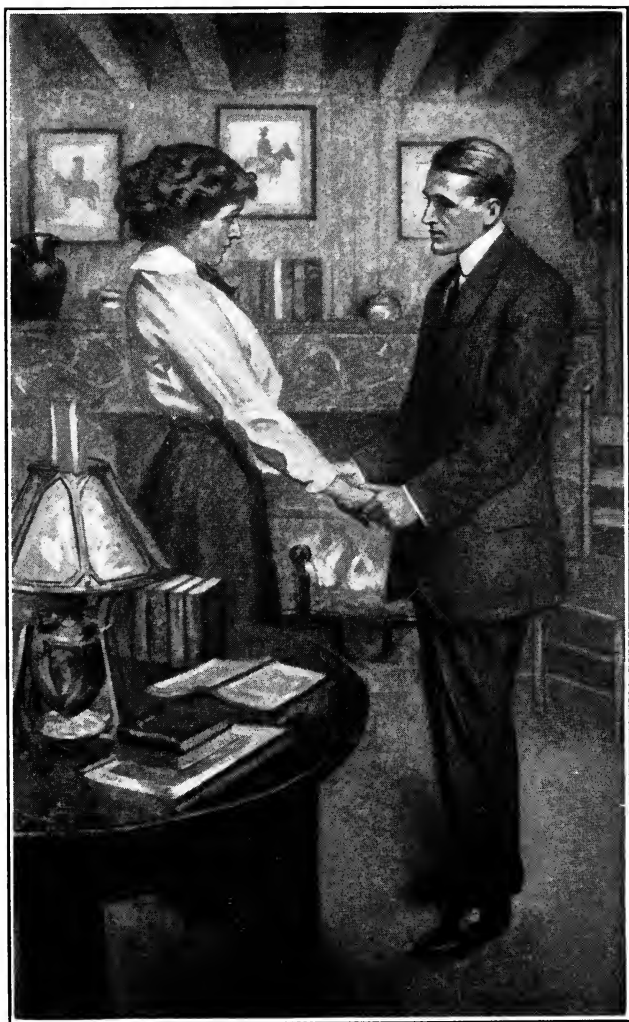
and father promised that we might go when we grew up. Now everything is getting so civilized out west, do let us start on our pilgrimage while there is some of the wilderness left." Jack's next words to her friend were spoken in such a low tone that no one else could guess what she was saying: "I think father would like you to keep the promise to us, if you could, Jim, and it would be the most wonderful opportunity in the world for you with Ruth."

Jim gazed slowly about the group of girls without the least indication that he had understood Jack's suggestion. "Well, I will think things over for a few days and kind of see how the land lies," he announced aloud, "and if there is anybody around who can look after the ranch for me, I think maybe I had better see that you don't come to harm."

Jack gave Jim a little shake and Jean pulled him up from the breakfast table. "Don't talk in that tiresome, dutiful fashion, Jim Colter; we will not stand it," Jean protested; "for you know perfectly well that you are as crazy about our jaunt as the rest of us and you wouldn't miss it now for worlds!"

The entire breakfast party had gotten up





"I DECLARE, I FEEL LIKE I HADN'T SEEN YOU IN A
HUNDRED YEARS!"

from the table and were fluttering about the room. A little pine fire burned in the fireplace, but the windows and doors were wide open. Some one walked across the front porch and knocked, and when no one answered, followed the sound of the voices indoors. Frieda gave the first exclamation of surprise at their visitor, tripped over a rocking chair in running to him and landed in the arms of Frank Kent. "Oh, I am glad to see you!" she exclaimed happily. "Why, we thought you were at home in England. What can you be doing here?"

"I have come to see you, Frieda," Frank answered immediately, "but besides you, every single other person at the Rainbow Ranch." Frank must have had half a dozen arms to have shaken hands with all his friends in the room at the same time, yet somehow, in spite of their greetings, he managed to give both his hands to Jack and to grasp hers in the warm friendliness to which she was accustomed from him.

"I declare, I feel like I hadn't seen you in a hundred years," he said simply; "and yet it has been only about six months."

"What are you doing in this part of the world again, Mr. Kent?" Jim Colter inquired

rather coolly. He liked Frank Kent well enough, but the young man had gone home to England, when the affairs of the ranch girls were safely settled with his cousin Daniel Norton, who had tried to steal their home from them, and Jim had not expected nor desired to see the English fellow again. He didn't care much for foreigners, even Anglo-Saxon ones.

"I am only here for a little while, Mr. Colter," Frank Kent explained, answering the question in Jim's words and in Jack's eyes. "I came back to America on a short business trip. My father heard of some mines in Colorado, and as I was so enthusiastic about the West he sent me out to investigate them for him. As Colorado is a sister state to Wyoming, I had to slip across the border, you know," he ended shyly.

Olive had let every one else in the room finish their welcome to Frank Kent before she attempted to speak to him. Now she put out her slender hand and held his only for a moment while her face flushed and her dark eyes shone with a soft radiance. "I am truly glad to see you again," she declared with more real feeling than any one of the other girls had yet revealed. Jack, who

adored Olive, and was a little jealous of any affection she might show for other people, stared at her curiously.

"O Frank, do let's all go out of doors," Jack suggested. "We have the most wonderful scheme we want to tell you about and we want to know everything about your people in England, your father and mother and two sisters and your wonderful estate in Surrey."

The entire party was just leaving the living room when Aunt Ellen's tall form blocked the door. Her face showed anger and she held the small Indian boy by his uninjured arm. Carlos' eyes were larger and more mournful than ever and his lips set in an obstinate curve.

"This boy says he won't eat with Zack and me," Aunt Ellen announced angrily. "He says he is the son of a chief and the grandson of one and that he should be fed first; and I won't put up with such nonsense."

"O Carlos!" Olive came across the room and dropped on the floor in front of the lad. "How can you be so silly and ungrateful?" she asked pleadingly. "Aunt Ellen, his people are all dead; they were killed in a fight on the plains, and I don't know whether Carlos is a chief's son or not. But of course

we can't keep him at the ranch if he is troublesome."

Olive was such a lovely picture as she knelt on the floor gazing up into the Indian boy's face that Frank Kent looked at her closely for the first time since he entered Rainbow Lodge. She was more changed than any one of the ranch girls in the six months of his absence, and seemed older and somehow more graceful and elusive than ever.

Jim Colter took several great strides across the room toward small Carlos, without apparently heeding Ruth's little cry of remonstrance nor Olive's plea for patience; he seemed so big and fierce and strong and the Indian boy so little and weak and defiant, that it was like a great eagle pouncing down on an impudent sparrow. Jim swooped Carlos up in his arms, but instead of devouring him, put the lad down in a chair by the breakfast table, poured out a glass of milk for him and made him drink it, for he saw what no one else had, that the boy was almost dying of hunger.

"Leave us to ourselves, please," Jim demanded, smiling at Aunt Ellen apologetically. "I want to see after this boy myself for a few minutes. Who knows but we may need

just such a little scout in our trip across the prairies."

Ruth smiled at Jim without a trace of the old-maid disapproval of him which she once felt, and Olive gave a sigh of relief, for she had been worrying all through breakfast about what they could do with Carlos when they went on their wonderful caravan trip. It had seemed so unkind to desert him after his long and faithful quest of her.

A quarter of an hour later Jim came out in the yard, and the Indian lad went to the kitchen to do as he was bid. Whatever Jim had told him served to keep him proudly obedient so long as he remained at the ranch house.

In front of the Lodge, Jean, Olive, Frieda and Ruth were still talking of their journey, while Frank and Jack had wandered off somewhere together. Jean was flitting about in the sunlight like a brown sparrow, twittering and singing and hopping from very joy at being alive. She suddenly seized Jim's hand and forced Ruth to take hold of his other one, then when Olive and Frieda joined the circle, she made them whirl around until they were completely out of breath. "I declare, I never was so happy in my life,"

Jean panted, when she finally released her victims. "I believe every good thing in the world comes true if you only want it hard enough. But don't you wish we were traveling across the plains right now? It is such a wonderful, wonderful day!"

Truly it might have been a spring morning in the Garden of Eden. The pale green leaves of the tall cottonwood trees were shimmering and quivering with each faintest breeze; the birds were rustling softly in their branches, and, beyond the trees, the alfalfa fields were now a delicate lavender and rose.

Jean pointed through an opening in the trees, where the landscape stretched almost unbroken to the line of hills on the western horizon and made a little curtsy to Ruth.

" 'Oh, what's the way to Arcady
Where all the leaves are merry?' "

"Tell me, Ruth, dear," she quoted mischievously from a volume of poems she and her chaperon had just finished reading.

Ruth shook her head, but Jim stared at Jean thoughtfully. "Say that little verse again, Jean," he said slowly. "I don't know where Arcady is, but it is a pretty sounding place."

Jean laughed roguishly and blew him a kiss. "What has come over you, Jim, to make you willing to listen to poetry?" she inquired. "Arcady is just an ideal country that poets like to write about, but here's the way to find it if you like:

"What, know you not, old man (quoth he),—
Your hair is white, your face is wise,—
That *love* must kiss that Mortal's eyes
Who hopes to see fair Arcady?
No gold can buy you entrance there,—
But beggared love may go all bare—
No wisdom won with weariness,
But love goes in with Folly's dress—
No fame that wit could ever win,
But only love may lead love in
To Arcady, to Arcady.'"

At the end of her recitation Jean quickly put her hands in Olive's and Frieda's and ran off to see if any flowers had bloomed in their violet bed, leaving Ruth and Jim alone. Ruth was blushing, for she had a far-off idea of what Jean meant to suggest by her quotation, but Jim appeared so sublimely unconscious that she felt relieved. He was evidently thinking of something very different from love or Arcady, for Ruth had to touch him before he seemed to hear what

she was saying. "When may Jack write the people to say they can have the Lodge?" she inquired, determined not to be entirely forgotten by her companion, no matter how glad she was that he had paid no attention to Jean.

"The Lodge? Oh, any time," he answered vaguely, looking at Ruth in a way that made her catch her breath. Jim was not thinking at the moment of anything connected with Rainbow Lodge. He was wondering if a man, who had something in his past he wished to forget, could ever travel over into Arcady by the route Jean's poem suggested — Arcady, that country he knew nothing about except that the name had a pleasant sound.

CHAPTER V

MEETING WITH NEW PEOPLE

JEAN BRUCE, if you add one more item to that everlasting old list of yours, we will have to give up our trip," Jack Ralston remarked crossly. "Even if Jim has given us a few precious dollars to invest in our going-away outfits, we can't buy the entire town of Laramie and cart it across the state to the Yellowstone Park." Jack was standing in front of her mirror trying to fasten down her shirtwaist in the back, and as a pin had just pricked her finger, she was irritable.

"What was that funny thing you advised our buying last night, Olive?" Jean called into the next room, ignoring her cousin's protest in the serenest possible manner. Miss Bruce was dressed for a journey of some sort in a pretty, dark blue suit and a cream straw hat with a pair of jaunty blue wings atop of it. Her expression was one of demure readiness for any great event, yet she was seated

quietly at a table with a half-filled memorandum book before her and a much-used pencil in her hand.

Olive flitted in from the adjoining chamber with her new frock half buttoned. "Oh, never mind, if we can't afford the thing I suggested," she said soothingly. "I am afraid it will cost an awful lot, but I read that every traveler across a desert ought to have a sleeping bag to take along. We can wrap up in our old blankets and comforts, but I thought it would be fine to get a bag for Ruth if we could, for you know she is such a chilly person, and if she isn't comfortable at night she will lie awake and listen to the strange sounds of the desert that we love and she fears."

Jack looked instantly penitent. She was never impatient with Olive, as she sometimes was with Jean; and, besides, she had about finished dressing and the reflection in the glass was gratifying. The ranch girls had new spring suits sent from the East. Jack's was brown, and her little straw toque had in it a curling feather that matched the bronze tones in her hair.

"We will have the sleeping bag if we have to go without shoes," she answered amiably.

"But, Jean, dear, why do you have to have a bottle of violet perfume to take with you across the plains when you have lived for some sixteen years without one?"

"That's just the reason, Jack Ralston," Jean returned uncompromisingly. "I wonder when you'll learn that we are not tomboys any longer and ought to have the things other girls have. You know you are as vain of your appearance in that suit Cousin Ruth made you get, as you can be. I must say you do look rather well in it."

Jack kissed Jean quickly. "I am an interfering old thing," she confessed meekly. "But please don't talk about our being nearly grown up, for it frightens me; I am not going to be grown for years and years. Promise me you won't say a word about my remembering that I am a girl and a fairly elderly one the whole time we are on our caravan trip and I'll agree to do whatever *you* wish while we are in Laramie."

"All right. Here comes Frieda and Cousin Ruth, so it must be almost time for us to start," Jean consented, stuffing her paper and pencil into her shiny new traveling bag.

Jean, Jack and Olive were about to leave for the city of Laramie to purchase the sup-

plies for their caravan trip to the Yellowstone Park.

Several weeks had passed since Jean originated her wonderful idea, and most of the arrangements for the journey had been completed. The Harmons had signed the contract to rent Rainbow Lodge for the summer, and Frank Kent had gone to Colorado, after a short visit at the ranch, threatening to meet the girls again in some out-of-the-way place before their holiday was over.

The girls were trying not to appear perturbed, though they were really in a great state of excitement. For the first time in their lives they were to spend two nights alone in a hotel. Jim could not leave the ranch, on account of some special business; Ruth could not accompany them, because she would not leave Frieda, who had a bad cold and was not well enough to go. However, Mrs. Peterson, the proprietress of a boarding place where the girls were to stay, was an acquaintance of Jim's and had promised to act as their chaperon.

Frieda tumbled into the room at this instant, with her big blue eyes more aggrieved than usual and her small nose distinctly pink around the edges. It was her first experience

in being left at home and she was not happy over it. She flung her arms about her sister, and Jack leaned over to whisper pleadingly, "Promise you won't cry when we go, baby, and we'll bring you and Ruth the funniest surprise presents in town."

While Ruth was rearranging Jean's hat, which had slipped to one side in the flurry of departure, and straightening Olive's long coat, the rattling of the horses' harness and Jim's voice telling the girls to hurry could be distinctly heard.

"Don't forget my list of medicines, Jean, and don't forget the new toothbrushes," Ruth advised hastily. "And, Jack, please, for goodness' sake, don't fail to keep your appointment with the Harmons at their hotel to-morrow afternoon. As they have been good enough to wait in town an extra week for us to give up the Lodge to them after their long trip from New York, you ought to be willing to meet them if they wish it."

"Well, I'm not willing, Ruth," Jack demurred; "though we promise to keep our words like ladies. I confess I am horribly embarrassed at having to call on entire strangers with no one even to introduce us. I do devoutly hope the men of the family won't

think they have to appear, because I am afraid enough of the mother and daughter. I suppose it is this poor Elizabeth Harmon who is curious to see what we are like, so I presume we will have to give her the pleasure. Imagine us, Ruth, at five to-morrow afternoon making our bows to the rich New Yorkers. It is silly of me, but I have taken a dislike to the entire Harmon family simply because they are going to live in our home for a while, I suppose, though I am anxious enough for their money for our holiday."

During Jack's monologue the girls had gone into the yard, and a few minutes later Ruth and Frieda were almost overpowered by the fervor of their farewell embraces. The last glimpse they had of the travelers, Jack was standing up in their wagon, with Jean and Olive clutching at her skirts and entirely unmindful of the grandeur of her new attire, waving both hands and giving the familiar, long-drawn-out call of the cowboys of the Rainbow Ranch.

The trip to Laramie was uneventful, and though the ranch girls slept three in a bed, and talked till almost morning that they might enjoy to the full the novelty of the experience, their first night at Mrs. Peterson's

boarding house was equally without excitement.

By eight o'clock the following morning the girls set out on their first regular shopping expedition, and by four in the afternoon Jean sank dejectedly down on a stool in a grocery store. "Girls," she declared wearily, "we have shopped all day and shopped all night and shopped again until broad daylight. At least, I feel as if we had, and if you don't take me somewhere to rest I shall surely die." But the girls had scrimped and saved pennies all day in order to buy the sleeping bags for Ruth and Freida, and would not give up until they were purchased.

Poor Jean was forcibly dragged from her resting place by Olive and Jack, and the three girls set out down the street again, gazing in all the shop windows. "For mercy's sake, what kind of a store would keep a sleeping bag, Olive?" Jean inquired mournfully, leaning heavily upon Jack, who walked next her. "I have seen a punching bag in Jim's room at the rancho, and I have heard somewhere of carpet-bags, but I have no more idea of what a sleeping bag is like than the old man in the moon."

"Well, I don't know exactly either, Jean,"

Olive confessed, walking a little in advance of her friends, with her eyes on the ground. Her frightened "Oh!" and stumble against Jack brought the entire party to a standstill. A young man had been marching along the street toward them in an entirely abstracted state of mind and had run into Olive.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered apologetically. "I am not a native of this place and——"

Jack's eyes flashed with indignation and Olive flushed, with the soft color that was peculiar to her rising in delicate waves from her throat to her forehead, but mischievous Jean giggled. "Is it the custom to bump into people in the place you do come from?" she inquired innocently. "Because, crude as we are, it isn't the custom here."

Jack frowned at Jean's frivolity, indicating very plainly that Miss Bruce was not to enter into a conversation with a stranger, but she need not have worried, because the young man was not paying the least attention either to her or Jean. He was staring at Olive, not rudely, but with a curious, questioning gaze that made her drop her dark eyes until her long, straight lashes touched her cheeks.

"I hope I didn't hurt you," the young fellow protested awkwardly. Olive shook her head without glancing up, but the other two girls got a good look at him. He was almost as dark as Olive herself, although he had none of her foreign appearance, and was big and broad-shouldered, and seemed to be an eastern college fellow, twenty or twenty-one years old.

Jack engineered her party into a near-by department store, leaving the young man still staring after them with his hat in his hand.

"Great Scott, what a boor I was!" he exclaimed to himself a second later. "But I never had anything strike me so all of a heap as that girl's face in my life." And he strode away looking tremendously puzzled.

Fortunately the brown woolen sleeping bag for Ruth was discovered in this first shop, but by the time a smaller one was bought for Frieda, it occurred to Jack to ask the time, as no one of them possessed a watch, and Jean and Olive had wandered off to make new investments in motor veils. "Ten minutes to five o'clock," the shopkeeper announced, and Jack's heart sank to zero. All day she had been wishing that she had not promised Ruth to keep the appointment with

the Harmons, but what would Jean and Olive do when they found they had no time to dress before their engagement?

"Girls," a sepulchral voice whispered suddenly in Jean's ear, "we have just ten minutes to get to the hotel to call on those dreadful Harmons, if we rush off this minute."

Jean caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror which happened to be just before her on the counter. Her stylish appearance of the morning had disappeared; her hat was on one side and a smudge decorated the tip of her piquant nose. Then she gazed disapprovingly at Jack, who was almost as much wilted and whose hair was anything but neat. Olive's appearance was the best, but she was unusually pale, with violet shadows under her eyes and a soft droop to her whole body.

"Behold the Three Graces!" Jean remarked disdainfully. "Jack Ralston, I'll not go a step to call on those people until we have had a chance to fix ourselves up. I know they will talk all summer about how dreadful we are if they see us first looking such frights."

"But, Jean," Jack argued, as much depressed as her cousin, "if we go back to our boarding place and dress before we make our call we shall be so horribly late that Mrs.

Harmon probably won't see us and she may be so offended that she will refuse to come to the Lodge this summer. Then good-by to our caravan trip."

Jean's rebellious attitude slowly altered. "But what shall I do about the smut on my nose, Jack?" she objected faintly.

"Rub it off with your handkerchief," Jack replied cruelly, as the three girls made a hurried rush for a car.

"But we may meet the son of the family, and I think Donald Harmon is a dream of a name," Jean continued mournfully, "and I did hope that one of us would be able to make an impression on him."

Olive laughed and gave Jack's hand a conciliatory squeeze, for Jack's face had flushed as it usually did when Jean made any such teasing suggestion. The truth of the matter was that Jack hated to think there was any real difference between friendship with a boy or a girl, and Jean, though she only joked about the subject at present, cherished a very different idea.

"It is much more important that we make ourselves agreeable to Mrs. Harmon and her daughter," Jack answered, with her nose in the air, as she sat down in the car, but Jean

merely lifted her pretty shoulders and gave a sly glance at Olive. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Ralston," she apologized. "I forgot you were a man-hater, unless one leaves Frank Kent out of the question." This was a hateful speech of Jean's and she deserved the speedy punishment she received.

The three ranch girls found the hotel they sought and were given the number of Mrs. Harmon's sitting room. They hesitated for a minute outside her door. "I don't know why I feel so nervous about going in, just as though something dreadful was going to happen," Jack whispered softly. "I don't even like to knock."

"I know what is troubling you, Jack," Olive murmured gently. "None of us has confessed it to the other, but I believe we are nervous about meeting Elizabeth Harmon. We don't know how ill she is or whether she is even able to walk, and we are afraid we may do or say the wrong thing."

"I am sure you won't, Olive," Jack returned, as she summoned courage to knock at the closed door. The girls thought they heard a faint response from the inside, and walked slowly into the room, hesitating for a moment because of the sudden change

from daylight to almost complete darkness. The blinds at the windows were drawn closely down, and there was no light except that which shone from two rose-colored candles that burned on the tall mantel-piece. No one seemed to be in the room as Jean started blindly forward. Olive put out her hand to stop her, but she was not in time, for at the same instant Jean plunged blindly into a small table loaded with teacups, and the quiet room echoed with the noise of crashing china and embarrassed exclamations from poor Jean.

The next moment Jack and Olive saw a fragile figure rise up from an immense leather chair and swing herself toward them on a single crutch. She was so thin and delicate and dressed in such an exquisite clinging white gown that she looked like the ghost of a girl, the only color about whom was the mass of shining red-gold hair that hung in a loose cloud over her shoulders.

"Oh, I am so sorry and ashamed!" Jean murmured miserably, her brown eyes filling with tears, as she surveyed the havoc she had wrought.

"Please don't mind; it was all my fault." Elizabeth Harmon put out a small, hot hand and touched Jean's fingers shyly. "I know

I ought not to have had the room so dark when you came in, but I have a fancy for meeting people for the first time in the soft candle light."

Elizabeth spoke the last words gently and Jack tried to conceal it, but her hostess knew that the girl with the sympathetic warm gray eyes understood why she preferred to meet strangers in a semi-darkness.

Elizabeth was not a pretty girl. Her eyes were too pale a blue and she looked too ill for beauty; besides, her face had a wilful and unhappy expression, and yet, in spite of these defects, she had a curious kind of grace and charm.

Jean and Olive were trying vainly to pick up the shattered teacups, so it was Jack who first saw Elizabeth Harmon's dilemma. She had walked across the room toward them, but she was not strong enough to get back to her chair alone and she was too sensitive to ask for help. Jack put her arm about her hostess, without waiting for her permission, and led her to a chair, then she sat down on a little spindle-legged stool near her, feeling shy and confused.

"You shouldn't have helped me; I hate to have people do things for me," Elizabeth

remarked rudely. "I could have walked back to my chair perfectly well by myself. Please do sit down, everybody; you make me feel dreadfully nervous. Mother would join us if she knew you were here."

The ranch girls were embarrassed by their hostess' ungracious manner, but they could not be really angry with her. Jean and Olive wondered why she didn't let her mother know of their arrival. Again Jack guessed the truth. Elizabeth could not get across the room to the bell and would not ask one of them to ring it for her. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Elizabeth bent over toward Jack, whispering softly: "Forgive my being so hateful, and thank you for helping me. I have wanted dreadfully to know you girls, but I'm afraid you'll think I am so spoiled you won't have anything to do with me. Will you please ring the bell?"

Jack moved quietly across the room, but before she reached the bell the door flew open, admitting a big fellow with flashing white teeth. He stopped in amazement at the sight of the three visitors. Jean and Jack recognized him at once as the young man who had stared at Olive so curiously after running into her on the street.

CHAPTER VI

A CURIOUS RESEMBLANCE

I'LL be—I beg your pardon,” Donald Harmon apologized hurriedly. “Sister, I didn’t know your visitors had come.” He held out his hand to Jack, who was nearest him. “I ought to have known who you were when I met you an hour ago, but I was a little confused over something,” he said.

Elizabeth Harmon introduced her brother to the girls, whose names she had now learned. When Donald spoke to Olive he tried in vain to hide his puzzled expression, and again she dropped her gaze before his as though she did not wish him to see her face. Olive was always shy, but to-day she seemed more so than usual, and she had a peculiar fashion, like some flowers, of folding herself about with little leaves and tendrils of reserve to hide her real self from the outside world.

Donald Harmon sat down next Jack and immediately across from Olive, but Jack

made no effort to open a conversation with him, for she did not like him and did object to the odd way in which he gazed at Olive.

"What is your friend's name? Donald inquired immediately.

"Olive," Jack returned in a non-committal fashion.

"But Olive what? I have a special reason for wishing to know," the young fellow protested impatiently. Olive and Jean were talking with Elizabeth and were not observing Jack and her companion.

For the fleeting part of a moment Jack hesitated, "Olive—why, Olive Ralston," she replied quietly. "I thought you knew our name was Ralston."

"I did," Donald answered. "Please don't think I am mad, but I thought for a second she might have another name. Have you ever heard the theory that we all have a double somewhere in the world? I want you to look closely at my mother when she comes in. Your sister is enough like her to be her own child, though of course there is a difference in their coloring and expressions and perhaps other details that I have not noticed, but when I saw your sister on the street to-day I was overcome by their likeness." At this moment

Donald Harmon, hearing his mother's voice in the hall, quickly turned on the electric lights.

Jacqueline Ralston caught her breath before the strange vista of possibilities that Donald Harmon's suggestion opened to her imagination. Never had she ceased to wonder at the mystery of Olive's birth. "Has your mother ever been out west before?" Jack asked hastily. And Donald only had time to answer, "Never in her life," when Mrs. Harmon entered the sitting room.

Jack's first emotion was one of intense and selfish relief. Mrs. Harmon and Olive did not look in the least alike—the son's idea had been absurd. Mrs. Harmon's eyes were blue and Olive's black, her complexion was fair and Olive's dark. It was true Mrs. Harmon did have black hair, though it was now slightly tinged with gray, and it grew in a point like Olive's in the center of her low, broad forehead, but there was nothing remarkable in this little point of resemblance. Jack thought Mrs. Harmon beautiful and the first real society woman she had ever seen. Her manner was gracious and friendly, yet Jack knew instinctively that few people were ever allowed to fathom her real feelings.

"Surely you see the likeness," Donald whispered boyishly. "It isn't that their features are so alike, it is something I can hardly explain to you if you don't see it yourself. I have always thought my mother the most beautiful person in the world, but your sister is nearly as pretty."

Jack frowned, for she did not care to have Donald Harmon discuss Olive in this outspoken fashion.

Mrs. Harmon was sitting between Jean and Olive, listening to Jean's apology for the broken teacups. Like most older people, she was attracted by her piquant manner and appearance. So far she had paid no particular attention to Olive, hereby including her with the other in a general greeting.

Donald strode over to his sister's chair and murmured something under his breath. Elizabeth flushed, stared across the room and shook her head pettishly. It was one of the trials of her life that, though she bore no resemblance to her beautiful mother, her brother was supposed to look like her.

Olive and Mrs. Harmon had their heads close together. "I say, mother," Don broke out impetuously, "for the life of me I can't see why no one else speaks of it. Miss Olive

Ralston looks ten times more like you than either Elizabeth or I do."

Mrs. Harmon turned to face Olive. "I wish I thought so, Don," she answered girlishly: "Miss Ralston is so pretty." She took one of Olive's hands, but Olive was so embarrassed at being the center of all eyes that she blushed furiously and gazed steadfastly down at her lap.

"I am sorry not to agree with you, Don, dear," Mrs. Harmon answered a moment later. "This Miss Ralston looks like a foreign girl, an Italian or Spaniard, and I am a thorough New Yorker. Were your father and mother western people?" she asked Olive.

Olive's face paled and her lips quivered. Would she have courage to announce before these strangers that she had no idea who her mother and father were nor from whence they had come? Before she could find her voice Jack rushed blindly to the rescue. "Olive is our adopted sister, Mrs. Harmon," she explained briefly; "but we do not like people to know it, so we rarely speak of her past. You must forgive her if she does not answer you."

With perfect good taste Mrs. Harmon immediately changed the conversation to

another subject, but Jack, who was watching her closely, saw that every now and then she gazed intently at Olive. If any odd fancy crossed her mind or any half-forgotten memory, she gave no sign of it. Once she leaned back wearily after Elizabeth had contradicted her, and Jack had an uncomfortable moment. Perhaps Mrs. Harmon did suggest Olive when her eyes were down and her face was in repose, but she banished the idea as a ridiculous one. Donald, however, clung obstinately to his first impression and devoted the rest of his time to trying to make Olive talk.

Quite naturally the group of people had separated themselves into pairs. Jack, who was so strong and independent, who showed vigor and joy of living in every movement of her body, was deeply touched by Elizabeth Harmon's weakness. She recognized that the girl was spoiled and that she might be subject to impossible moods, but she was so sorry for her that she didn't care about her faults. Indeed, she said to herself that if ever she had the same misfortune to endure she would be far more difficult than Elizabeth.

"I wish my father would come," Elizabeth said to Jack for the third time in the last ten minutes. "You see, he and I are chums,

and mother and Don rather hit it off better together. Mother is awfully good to me and lets me do whatever I please, but she has never been able to forgive my **not** being good-looking like Don."

Before Jack could show Elizabeth how her speech had shocked her, Mr. Harmon's entrance brought a new atmosphere into the room. He was a typical Wall Street broker, well dressed, with a heavy-set figure, reddish hair that was turning white, and a curt, businesslike manner. He spoke politely to his wife and her guests, but it was plain to everybody present that he thought only of his daughter. Jack believed she would have disliked him except for his devotion to Elizabeth. He never seemed unconscious of her for a moment and his expression softened each time he spoke to her. Otherwise he appeared as a shrewd, hard man who would get the best of a bargain whenever he had the chance. Standing at the back of his daughter's chair, he at once asked Jack a dozen questions about Rainbow Lodge—what vegetables were raised in their garden, whether they were included in the rent of the Lodge, what the water supply was for the house. It was evident that he meant to get as much as pos-

sible for his money, and Jack wondered if the richest people were not often those who tried to drive the hardest bargains.

Only once did Mr. Harmon's manner change. This was when Elizabeth put her hand on his sleeve and begged him to ask Jack if there was a pony on the ranch that she could have to drive.

"I'm not a rich man—far from it," Mr. Harmon remarked quickly; "but if you will let my daughter have one of your horses for the summer, I will pay you anything in reason. There is nothing in the world I care for so deeply as her health and happiness."

Jack shook her head. From her position near the sick girl she could see how Elizabeth's eyes glistened at the prospect of being allowed to drive herself. "I'm so sorry," Jack answered. "If any one of us had a pony that would be of any pleasure to Elizabeth, of course we would lend it to her with pleasure, but you see we only ride horseback at the ranch and have never owned any kind of cart. The ponies are not broken for driving."

As soon as her speech was over Jack realized that Elizabeth Harmon resented her mention of their horseback riding, because it was a pleasure impossible for her, and that Mr.

Harmon was in such close sympathy with his daughter that he also was displeased. But Jack, in spite of her hot temper, was not offended. "I tell you what we might do, Miss Harmon: suppose you get your father to send a governess' cart, or whatever you wish to use, to the Rainbow Ranch right away. Then when we go back I will make one of our cowboys begin to accustom one of our ponies to driving. Your brother can see that it is all right, and perhaps we may possibly have a chance to go over the ranch together. I would like to show you the places we love best, before we start on our trip. I am sure ranch life and the bracing western air will do your daughter a great deal of good, Mr. Harmon," Jack said, rising to give Jean and Olive the signal for saying farewell.

"I wish you weren't going away, Miss Ralston—Jack," Elizabeth Harmon burst out impulsively. "If you would stay at home with me I would be sure to get well."

Jack laughed. "You are awfully good, but if we stayed at home there would be no room for you. But I feel ever so much happier about renting our home since I have met you. I love the ranch so dearly I am afraid that anyone who sees it will begin to care for it

as I do and try to get possession of it as soon as we are out of sight."

Mr. Harmon shook hands with Jack with more cordiality than he showed to most people. "Don't worry about your cattle ranch, Miss Ralston," he protested. "I am about as much interested in raising cattle as I am in the North Pole, but if you find any odd gold mines on your way to the Yellowstone, I'm the man for you. I make a specialty of gold mining stock on Wall Street."

Having safely arrived once more at Mrs. Peterson's boarding house, the three ranch girls retired to their bedrooms as soon as dinner was over. After several hours of animated discussion, the decision was reached that on the whole the Harmons had not made an agreeable impression. Jack liked Elizabeth, and Jean and Olive thought Mrs. Harmon very attractive and the son fairly so. But their new acquaintances did not strike the girls as a happy or united family. Certainly there were grave differences of opinion between them and they seemed to be divided among themselves.

Among them, Jack, Olive and Jean managed to eat three pounds of candy before they went to sleep. Jack wondered next morning

if it were the candy or the experiences of the day that made her sleep such a queer jumble of dreams. She dreamed that the Harmons were trying to get Olive away from her and that she was holding to her skirts with all her might. Then Frank Kent appeared, but instead of helping her save Olive he seemed to be on the Harmons' side. Jack felt herself slipping down, down into a great, dark abyss. She awakened finally to find the tears running down her cheeks, Jean punching her in the ribs to bring her back to her senses and Olive imploring her to tell them what was the trouble.

"Come out of that nightmare, for heaven's sake, Jack Ralston," Jean insisted. "You were weeping as though some terrible thing had happened. As I was dreaming sweetly of our caravan trip I thought you were some wild animal wailing, away off in the wilderness."

CHAPTER VII

"A LITTLE HOUSE ON WHEELS"

OUR caravan looks like the real thing, doesn't it, Jim?" Jean exclaimed, balancing herself insecurely on the front wheel of a mammoth wagon and peering over inside it at a tall figure under the cover. "Do you think we will be able to get off this afternoon?"

Jim Colter climbed wearily out and sat on the driver's seat, surveying his questioner gloomily. "Don't you think you might go in the house and dress or fix your hair or something?" he asked. "You have asked me twenty questions in the last ten minutes, and I might be working in the time it takes to answer you. We are going to get away from this ranch to-day if it's dark before we start. It's awful with those Harmons, and you and Jack sleeping at the rancho, and Olive and Frieda and Miss Ruth crowded into one bedroom at the Lodge. I don't see why they couldn't have stayed away from here until

after we had gone. They have nearly pestered the life out of me, and now what do you think is the latest?"

Jim lit a cigar about half a foot long, so it occurred to Jean that he must intend to continue the conversation with her for at least a few minutes. She caught hold of Jim's hand and swung herself up into the seat beside him.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning, ten days after the ranch girls' trip to Laramie. The caravan for their journey to the Yellowstone Park was standing alongside the road midway between Rainbow Lodge and the rancho, where Jim lived. It was a comfortable distance from the Lodge, because Jim preferred any amount of labor in carrying the girls' belongings from their house to the wagon to being compelled to exchange fashionable conversation with the Harmon family and to answer their tenderfoot questions about the affairs of the ranch. Near Jean's and Jim's novel traveling coach, four rough, short-legged ponies and four larger horses tethered to short ropes were quietly grazing. The scene suggested a circus resting for a short time before starting on its travels. The troupe of actors at present included only

Jean and Jim, but the circus appeared to be a new and stylish one, for “Mrs. Jarley’s” famous caravan was not more spick and span and less like a gypsy cart than the little house on wheels belonging to the ranch girls. Instead of being covered with an ordinary white canvas top, the canopy over the largest of the ranch mess-wagons was made of new, strong and serviceable golden-brown waterproof khaki. The expedition into wonderland was to have a strictly military appearance, for the five girls were to wear service uniforms of the same material.

“Well, what’s the latest, Jim?” Jean inquired coaxingly, crossing her feet and slipping her arm through her companion’s. She was feeling a little sore, for Olive and Jack had gone off driving with Elizabeth and Donald Harmon without asking her to go with them, as the cart held only four people. So Jean was rather glad to gossip about the newly arrived family.

Jim frowned darkly in answer to Jean’s question. “Well, the first thing—that Harmon fellow marched himself down to the rancho this morning before any of you girls were up and invited me to let him go along on our trip, if you would give your consent.

I told him I wasn't thinking of running a co-educational excursion party; my job was to look after girls, not boys." Jim took another long, slow puff at his cigar and was silent.

"Do go on, Jim," Jean urged, giving him a friendly nudge. "You know Donald Harmon said something else that made you cross."

"Oh, no, except he asked such an all-fired lot of questions," Jim answered. "I didn't see his game at first; he kind of led up to it by degrees. But he wanted to know how long Olive had been living with us and how you girls happened to adopt her and what made her own people give her up. When I found out what he was after I didn't give him the least bit of information. I hate a Paul Pry."

Jean laughed lightly, "Oh, it isn't just curiosity on Donald Harmon's part, Jim. Of course, you and Jack would scorn to notice it, but Donald has a crush on Olive. I have seen it from the first. Olive don't like him a bit, but he is always staring at her."

Jim threw away his half-finished cigar. "Look here, Jean Bruce, will you please stop talking about crushes and such nonsense?" he remarked sternly. "I never hear any of the

other girls talking such foolishness, and I think Miss Ruth ought to see that you put a stop to it. I mean to speak to her about it."

"Grouchy," Jean whispered under her breath, then her eyes sparkled wickedly. "Here comes Ruth now; I'll run and tell her that you want to complain of the way she is bringing me up." Jean slid down over the wagon wheel out of the reach of Jim's restraining fingers, and he retired into the covered depth of the wagon, pretending not to have observed Miss Drew's approach. However, Jean fled past her chaperon without a word and only a mischievous nod of her head.

Ruth was walking down the road from the Lodge, already dressed for the journey. Little blonde Frieda was on one side of her and little brown Carlos on the other, and all of them had their arms loaded with bundles. Ruth wore a short, plaited skirt which showed her pretty feet clad in high, brown leather boots. A Norfolk jacket, a tan silk blouse and a soft brown felt hat completed her costume. Somehow she seemed to have lost ten years of her age and looked about eighteen. There was no trace of the maidenly

primness that had been so conspicuous in the early days of her stay at the Rainbow Ranch. Her figure was pretty enough for a model in a fashion paper; her ash-brown hair and eyes that had once seemed plain when her skin was sallow, now had a picturesque charm of their own. Ruth's coloring suggested Burne-Jones' pictures of English women, with the same dull, even tones in their hair and eyes, and their clear, pallid skins warmed by an inner glow.

Frieda's going-away suit was also khaki and made in exactly the same style as the other girls'. She was too funny in it, with her plump body and fat legs. But her eyes under her plain felt hat were bluer than myrtle and her cheeks pinker than a rose.

Of the trio approaching the apparently empty caravan, only Carlos' expression was serious. A kind of inner rapture transfigured even his Indian solemnity. To be in the wilderness again and this time not with a roving Indian camp, but with "The Big White Chief," which was his name of Jim, and "The Princess," his title for Olive—the soul of the lad was filled to overflowing. Therefore, since an Indian must never show an emotion of joy or sorrow, Carlos was

more silent than ever. No wonder Frieda had lately found him a dull playmate, but then he filled one requirement—he was a good listener. So, on the whole, she was glad he was to be a member of their expedition though she could fancy a companion.

"Oh, Mr. Colter," Ruth's voice called, as she drew nearer the caravan, "if you are not too busy here are a few more things you might put in the wagon for us. We saw you hide a few minutes ago."

Jim stuck his head out and tried to look as severe as possible, though his companions were not of the kind one could easily treat with severity.

"Miss Drew," he said sternly, "if I had known what you girls were going to take on this trip I should never have consented to run it. I lie awake nights wondering how four horses are going to pull such a load, seven people and all this truck," Jim groaned. "I'm glad we've got two extra pack horses and two ponies for riding."

Ruth laughed, not in the least disturbed by Jim's complaints. "Please come down out of the wagon, Mr. Colter, and go attend to the last things on the ranch. We are to have an early lunch so we can start soon

after. I know I won't have the least trouble in finding a place to store away these things."

Jim crawled out submissively, lifting Frieda and Ruth into the van; then, after Carlos climbed in, he left them.

The three newcomers stood silent for a moment inside their caravan, speechless with satisfaction, as they surveyed the interior beauty and trimness of their equipage. The frame that supported the khaki cover of the wagon had been made by a cowboy on the ranch who had formerly been a carpenter. He had fashioned two small windows, one on either side, and at these windows Ruth had hung white muslin curtains. Outside the canopy toward the front of the wagon were two broad seats, each capable of holding three persons and shut off from the back by a heavy khaki curtain, while under the canopy were two long benches to rest the travelers by day and to serve Jim and Carlos for beds by night.

Suitcases and boxes were stored under the benches and seats, blankets and pillows were rolled tight and crammed into every available space. From a nail in the frame of the wagon hung a large mirror which Jean insisted upon bringing, completely surrounded

by pots and pans and important kitchen utensils. There was no great store of provisions, as the caravaners trusted to their guns and fishing tackle for game and fish, and intended to restock their larder in the towns along their route. A plan of campaign had been drawn up and solemnly agreed upon—the five girls were to do the cooking, Jim to look after the horses and set up the sleeping tent, and Carlos to fetch wood and water and teach them all he knew of the lore of the great outdoors.

Ruth saw that everything in the little house on wheels was in shipshape order for their start before she and the children returned to the Lodge to see if Olive and Jack were at home.

The two girls had been driving around the Rainbow Ranch with Donald and Elizabeth Harmon the greater part of the morning. From the hour of Elizabeth's arrival at the Lodge the day before she had not been willing to let Jack out of her sight. It was very trying, as Jack longed to help with the last preparations for their departure, but, faithful to her promise, with Olive's assistance she was showing off the place, driving an old plough horse hitched to a low yellow cart,

which Mr. Harmon had sent from town for his daughter. There was no pony yet safe to use with Elizabeth. They rode along on the far side of Rainbow Creek, the ranch girls pointing out the best fishing pools to Donald and showing him the trails that led to different parts of the ranch. Near the middle of the creek and in sight of the big rock where "Gypsy Joe" had been seen making his investigations, Elizabeth insisted she was tired and they must stop for her to rest. Donald lifted her out and she sat down on the trunk of an old tree with Olive, while Jack and Donald walked a few yards farther on, leaving their horse to wait patiently for them.

"I am going to show you a discovery, Mr. Harmon," Jack declared in a friendly fashion, anxious to make their new acquaintance feel at home. "Years ago I found a secret trail along here which no one knew of. It leads from this thick underbrush." Jack got down on her knees before a clump of bushes and parted them. Sure enough there was the beginning of an overgrown path which the eye could follow for a short distance. "I found this trail one day when I was a little girl playing over here with Jean and Frieda,"

she explained, "and I went on and on for miles until I came to a cave in some rocks, where some settlers had once lived. Jim Colter believes the path was made by gold seekers who came to get water from Rainbow Creek. Some of our other men claim they were searching for gold in our creek."

At this moment Elizabeth's impatient voice was heard, and Jack and Donald went back to her, but not before Donald had made up his mind to investigate the mysterious path pointed out to him. He meant to find out whether an eastern tenderfoot could be trusted to find his way along those first trails which the earliest pioneers had left.

Olive had been amusing Elizabeth by carving on the stump of a tree an Indian design, a perfect square cut into four equal parts, representing the direction of the four winds. Now Elizabeth insisted that they write their names in the spaces to show the bond of friendship between them. Neither Jack nor Olive wished to promise their friendship so readily to comparative strangers, yet neither of them knew how to deny the sick girl's whim. So the compact was made before they returned home.

Ruth and the girls were to have their last

luncheon with Mr. and Mrs. Harmon at the Lodge; Jim was not to be with them, as he scorned to have anything to do with the strangers. The last course had been served and they were just getting up from the table when a long, clear call was heard. The five ranch girls sprang instantly to their feet and began to gather up their coats and last remaining parcels. On the front porch farewells were said to Mr. and Mrs. Harmon and Elizabeth and to Aunt Ellen and Uncle Zack. The old woman, who was to stay to look after the newcomers with her husband's help, had her apron over her head and refused to be comforted; Uncle Zack was equally depressed, realizing the loneliness and longing for the girls that they would soon feel.

Five khaki figures now sped down the road toward the caravan with Donald, who was trying to assist with the bundles. Seated in the driver's seat, with Carlos next him, and cracking a long whip, was Jim Colter. Every speck of his grouchiness had disappeared; his eyes were as shining and his lips as smiling as Frieda's.

"Good-by, Mr. Harmon," Jack said, smiling half sadly at Donald. "Please take good care of things for us at the ranch. I feel

almost like a traitor in turning my back on my home."

Donald laughed. "Oh, don't worry," he answered kindly. "You will find things just as you left them when you get back. You know we want to borrow, not to steal your place." And for some reason neither Jack nor Donald ever forgot his words.

The horn sounded again; Jim turned his horses with their noses toward the western sun, when suddenly there was a loud clanging from the great bell that hung in front of the rancho to summon the cowboys from across the fields. Six cowboys rode in toward the caravan in as many different directions. As the big wagon wheels crunched in the sand with the pack-horses trailing behind and Olive's and Jack's ponies alongside, the six cowboys formed a semicircle, the emblem of the Rainbow Ranch, and cracking their whips in unison let out a tremendous yell. It was the call the Indians use before going into battle and it might have frozen the blood of the uninitiated, but the ranch girls knew it meant good luck and went away with the sound ringing in their ears.

The caravan party did not feel they had started on their journey until they crossed

the border of their own ranch. The land beyond was familiar enough, but this afternoon it was invested with a new charm. It was a new world, because they had set out on a voyage of discovery, so it was disenchanting when they had ridden a few miles beyond their own place to discover another caravan, smaller and far shabbier than theirs, but still a caravan, drawn up by the side of a solitary tree along the road. A ragged girl nursing a baby was resting in the grass and an old woman was bending over a freshly lit camp-fire. There was no man in sight, but Jim recognized the wayfarers with a sudden tightening of his lips before any one of the girls spoke.

"Why, there are our gypsies!" Jean declared lightly. "And, Ruth, there is the old woman who told us our fortunes. She said you were going on a journey, and sure enough you are! I wonder if any other of her predictions will come true. She told us such a jumble of things and most of it was such utter nonsense that I can't remember half of them."

Ruth leaned over toward the front seat: "Have you any idea why those people are staying around in this neighborhood, Mr.

Jim?" she asked, using her new name for him for the first time.

"No," Jim answered truthfully, beaming approval of his title.

An hour or so afterwards Jack and Olive were riding ahead of the wagon looking for a suitable place to strike camp for the night. There was no water near, but a tiny clump of trees offered a certain shelter, and they went toward it. From a cluster of bushes a western bluebird, which is bluer than all others, rose up and soared over the girls' heads, homing toward its nest in the trees. It was a wonderful darting ray of splendid color against the orange glow of the setting sun.

Olive clapped her hands softly. "O Jack, do let's get Jim to pitch our tent here for the night. That was a bluebird that flew across our path, and it's a good omen: 'the bluebird for happiness'—don't you remember the play Ruth read us?"

CHAPTER VIII

ALONG THE ROAD

FOR a week the caravan party moved on. They had gotten away from the railroad and were following an ancient trail which wound southward to the timberlands of the Yellowstone, passing through valleys and canyons and over upland summits, now faint and grass-grown, now lost in the sand drifts, but always reappearing and always re-discovered by Jim's trained eyes. The journey across the state was to last several weeks, and the caravaners were in no hurry to accomplish it.

One morning Ruth came to the tent door, dressed before any of the girls. She stood for a moment looking about her and then waved her hand to Jim, who was chopping a big log of wood that Carlos had dragged into the camp the night before. "Mr. Jim," she called, "do you think there is any special need of our traveling to-day? The girls and I have been talking things over and we

think that we and the horses need a rest. This is such an enchanting place, anyhow, I feel this morning I would like to spend my life here."

Jim stalked over to the tent, with his face as radiant as the morning. He had his arms full of wood, and the string of shining fish over his shoulder showed that he had been up and at work for several hours. "Sure," he agreed heartily. "I'd like nothing better than to loaf a while in this part of the country. I've got some harness to mend and a lot of odd jobs to do, and this is sure the prettiest spot we've seen."

The wagon and horses were a little distance from the ranch girls' tent, but still in plain view. The tent was at the head of a silver stream that ran like a ribbon through a green oasis of "gramma" grass. In the distance rocks that looked like battlements rose on either side of a deep gorge, and dimly seen farther on were hoary old mountain tops with their peaked caps of snow.

Ruth laughed. "An honest confession is good for the soul, isn't it? I should have told you that my real reason for not wishing to move on to-day is that I simply have got to do some housekeeping. My New England

soul is racked by the way our pots and pans are looking, and Jean says if she doesn't have a chance to wash the sand out of her hair she will have to cut it off and wear a wig. If you'll make up the fire for me, I'll get breakfast in a minute; the girls already are starving."

"Then why don't one of them come out and help you cook?" Jim demanded automatically. "I'm plumb afraid they are putting too much of the work on you."

"Injustice, thy name is Jim Colter!" Jack exclaimed at this minute, appearing before the fire with a sleepy look in her gray eyes, and a coffeepot in her hand. "I told Ruth I'd get breakfast this morning, so run away, Ruthie, and help Frieda find her clothes; she is in the depth of despair about one of her shoes. And tell Jean and Olive they must set the table."

Jim swung his fish before Jack's delighted eyes. "I'll cook these, Missie," he said calmly. "I don't believe I care to trust you."

"All right. I'll fry the bacon to go with them," Jack returned in her most professional cook manner. "I like the odor of bacon these mornings in camp better than any flower that blooms. Isn't it great that

we have had a whole week of perfect sunshiny weather?"

The camp breakfast did not take much more than half an hour to get, though it was a pretty substantial meal. Coffee and chunks of toasted bread, fish, bacon, marmalade and jam, and this morning fresh water from the near-by spring, formed the menu. It took quite as long to eat, however, as the most elaborate repast served by a fashionable New York hotel. Jim moved over a little nearer the fire to be farther away from the girls when he finished. He got out his favorite pipe and tenderly snuggled the tobacco into it, and Jack saw the thought of the day's chores fade gently from his mind and a reminiscent light come into his eyes. Ruth was no longer overcome by household cares. The day stretched on before them, apparently an endless chain of golden opportunities to do nothing.

"I was around in this neighborhood once before," Jim remarked casually. This was as near as Jim had ever gotten to being confidential, and Jean and Jack exchanged glances.

"What were you doing here, Jim?" Jack queried, trying to make her voice appear perfectly indifferent.

Jim hunched his big shoulders and took a long puff at his pipe. "I was prospecting for gold, same as every other young idiot that ever came west not knowing a lump of gold from a chunk of mud when he found it," he returned calmly. "There are three little pine cone hills a matter of ten miles from here, with an ugly stream of water and a group of trees near them, where I believe I had a claim located once, a good many moons ago."

"And you never told us a word about it. Jim Colter, you are a pig!" Jean declared inelegantly.

"There wasn't nothing to tell, Jean," Jim replied in his usual slow, indifferent manner. "Just another fellow and I saw a hill with some bits of black rock with yellow streaks in it, and we dug away for a couple of months without getting anything out of it but trouble."

"Jim, I don't believe there wasn't gold in your mine," Jean declared resolutely. "You just gave up too soon."

"All right, Miss Bruce," Jim agreed. "You can have my claim if you want it. Come to find out, we weren't the first and I don't reckon we were the last fellows to go digging in that hill. It's called 'Miner's Folly', and

is about as gloomy a looking hole as anybody ever saw."

"I'd like to see the place awfully, Jim," Jack suggested eagerly.

"Don't doubt it for a moment, Jack," Jim returned unwinkingly.

Jack whispered something in Jean's ear. "I'll do no such thing, Jack Ralston," Jean replied firmly. "Remember, yesterday you were awfully selfish about letting me have my turn at riding horseback with Olive. I told you then I shouldn't do the next favor you asked me and I certainly don't mean to wear myself out on such a tramp. Besides, Jim wouldn't think of taking you."

"Wouldn't you, Jim?" Jack pleaded meekly.

Jim appeared to have no ears.

Jack slipped around by the fire and dropped a few pine cones on it.

"Wouldn't you kind of like to see that old mine you deserted, Jim?" Jack queried. "Suppose there is any change in it? Maybe it has turned out to be a really valuable claim since your day and you have never heard of it."

Jim shook his head, but Jack saw that she had lighted the fires of desire in his soul. "Maybe I will walk over toward the old

spot just to see what the scenery is like, when I finish my work," Jim admitted, a few minutes later, and his admission spelt defeat.

An hour after, Jim Colter and Jack Ralston set out with their rifles over their shoulders and their pockets stuffed with provisions, to find Jim's unlucky mine. Little brown Carlos followed them like a persistent, though distant shadow. He had been ordered by Jim to stay near the tent, water the horses and make himself generally useful, for Jim did not believe that he and Jack could get back from their fool's errand before bedtime. Of course, Jim did not consider that the girls he left behind would get into danger or mischief in his absence, or he would never have gone; but they had met with no rough characters on their journey and the country seemed perfectly safe. Neither Ruth nor Olive nor Jean objected to being left alone; indeed, they were rather glad to get rid of the man of their party for a little while. Ruth was worried only for fear Jack would get overtired from her long walk; she did not dream that any other trouble might befall her with Jim as her escort.

"Slow but sure, Jack. Remember, you promised to trust to my judgment on this

trip," Jim suggested kindly, when after several miles of travel Jack showed no signs of fatigue.

"All right, I remember," Jack answered obediently. "Let's sit down."

The two travelers had reached the deep gorge which they had seen from their tent, and Jim recalled that the trail to the old mine had followed this ravine for a part of the way and then branched off across country to the west.

Jack's sudden backward glance caught sight of a moving figure behind them. In a moment she recognized Carlos and wondered what Jim would say to him, for she knew he could be pretty fierce and savage when he was disobeyed.

"There's Carlos," Jack pleaded meekly; "don't be hard on him."

"I've known he was after us for the last half hour," Jim replied curtly. "Carlos, come here."

Carlos had been creeping along through the grass in Indian fashion, but now he straightened up his lithe body and came straight toward Jim. Jack knew he was horribly frightened and so she couldn't help but admire the boy's sudden grip on him-

self. He looked straight into the "Big White Chief's" eyes; only once his eyelids twitched.

"Why did you come with us when I said stay behind?" Jim demanded quietly with his own peculiar sternness.

The boy hesitated; but an Indian does not lie to his friends. "I heard you speak of the cave of the never-found gold," Carlos answered simply. "The Indians of the plains now know the value of the white man's gold. Often have I followed them into the desert to search for it in vain. For nothing else would I leave the women whom you gave me to tend, but I too must see the place of which you speak."

Jim groaned, and Jack laughed lightly. "Come on, Carlos," she said kindly. "Partner," she turned to Jim, "no matter what happens from this day's outing, remember you are responsible for planting the gold microbe in Carlos and me." For the rest of their tramp Jack could not but amuse herself, whenever her companions were silent, with wild dreams of what joy it would be for them to come across a gold mine and get suddenly very rich. She kept guessing and planning what she and the other girls would do. More than anything, she wished to play

fairy godmother to the overseer of their ranch. During the week of their caravan trip, Jim had showed so plainly that only Ruth and Frieda were still unconscious of it, how much he cared for the ranch girl's chaperon. And Jack knew how little, except the strength of his love, he had to offer her. Jim had been running the Rainbow Ranch, receiving a salary so small for the value of his services that it made Jack blush to think of it.

Time after time had she begged him to manage the ranch on shares, but he had always refused, saying he had no need of money, and the place made only enough to pay expenses, take care of the girls, and put a little by for their futures. And Jim knew they would need more money some day if they were ever to see anything of the great world which lay outside their ranch lands.

Jim paid no heed to Jack's unnatural silence, for his mind was fixed on a discovery that absorbed his entire interest. Other travelers had lately crossed the trail which he and his companions were following. Footprints were fresh upon it, and in an out-of-the-way spot a tin can showed a bright new label. The footprints not only followed the

path along the side of the ravine, but marked the same track through the more open country. Without these signs, Jim knew he could never have traced the old trail so easily, yet he felt the gold prospector's hot glow of resentment—another man had located his claim. Then he smiled, remembering he had turned his back on it as no good, nearly fourteen years before. Without a word to his companions, however, he kept his eyes fastened steadfastly on the ground and his ears alert for every sound each step of the way, but no other human being appeared in the vast solitude. Once Jim and Jack sighted a covey of quail and killed half a dozen. Ruth and the other girls were willing to eat quail so long as they did not have to see them killed.

About three o'clock in the afternoon the travelers had their first vision of Jim's three pine cone hills with the stream of brackish water running down the side of one of them, and in the background a dense thicket of evergreens. Forgetting their tired feet, Jack and Carlos made a sudden rush, but Jim caught hold of them, making them keep close to his side until he saw the place was deserted. At last he brought them in breathless silence to a yawning cave in the middle

hill. It was only a great, black hole, dull and uninteresting. Jack peered well into it for a sign of anything that sparkled or shone like a precious metal. It showed only a mixture of earth and stones and sand, and the whole place was so gloomy it gave her a shiver of apprehension. The sun was not so bright as it had been a short time before. Suddenly she felt cold and weary, though she could not explain the cause.

"It's a pretty dismal place, isn't it, Jim?" Jack said quickly. "I am awfully glad to have seen it of course, but I don't wonder you ran away. I am sure no gold could be discovered here." And the girl heaved a sigh of fatigue and disappointment. She was sure she had made the trip simply from idle curiosity, yet the chance of their finding a gold mine had been lurking in the back of her mind.

Jim was stalking about the deserted mine like a hound that had been given a scent. He had seen, not far from one of the hills, a piled-up heap of ashes, which showed that a fire had been built there within the past few days, and the rank grass in the vicinity pressed down by human bodies. Jack had picked up a tool from the earth immediately

in front of the mine, and the tool had been lately used.

"Wait here for me, Jack," Jim suggested finally. "I know you are tired and need a rest before we start back. Carlos, look after Miss Jack and don't go out of sight. I want to explore the neighborhood a bit. I will not be long. Nothing will happen, but if you want me call out."

Jack paid no special attention to Jim's departure. She found a comfortable place, sat down and closed her eyes. How soon she fell asleep she did not know, but she heard no sound from Carlos when he slipped away into the woods back of them. Tempted by the possession of a new gun, the boy disobeyed a second time that day.

CHAPTER IX

"MINER'S FOLLY"

JACK sat up with a start. She had dozed only a few minutes, and felt indignant with Carlos when she found he also had deserted her. It was time they were starting back for camp. "Jim! Jim! Carlos!" she halloed, in half-hearted fashion; then she hugged her sweater closer about her, glad that Ruth had insisted on her wearing it, for as evening approached it was growing strangely cooler.

There seemed nothing to do that was interesting before her companions returned. Jack wandered idly to the edge of the pine woods behind the hills, but saw and heard nothing of Carlos; then she examined the small stream along one of the hillsides, knelt and scooped up a handful of water, putting it to her lips. It was salt as the Dead Sea, and must have made life doubly hard for the men who worked in "Miner's Folly," for they could hear its soft trickle by day

and night and yet never quench their thirst in its waters.

All this time Jack was thinking, not of what she was doing, but of the queer big hole in the side of the hill, that was like a wound. Irresistibly she was drawn toward it by an impulse of curiosity and dread. Jim had told her of no tragedies except disappointed hopes that were buried in the deserted mine, yet she felt that if the cavern could suddenly change into an open mouth it would have many strange stories to tell of lives and fortunes lost by its false lure.

Jack stared so hard into the entrance of the tunnel that it no longer seemed dark to her. She went into it a few feet and peered about her. Curiosity was one of the strongest traits of Jacqueline Ralston's character, not a girl's idle desire so much as a boy's firm determination to find out what things are like, and how they are accomplished. Jack had never seen a gold mine before, and she did not wish to tell the girls nothing except that it was a big hole in the earth. The mouth of the cave was uninteresting, so Jack lit a match and walked a few feet further in. On the ground were bits of broken stone which she stuffed in her pocket for Frieda,

thinking she spied an odd glimmer in them. Although the main entrance to the mine was through a single opening, by the aid of her flickering light Jack saw that miners had pursued many dead lodes in the sides of the hill. This means they had dug tunnels wherever they hoped to follow a vein of gold, until the whole inside of the hill looked like a network of black passages.

It now occurred to Jack that Jim and Carlos must have returned and surely they would think the earth had opened and swallowed her, so out she crept into the daylight again. The place was still solitary and gloomy. “Jim! Jim! Carlos!” Jack cried aloud. There was no answer. If only she had waited five or ten minutes more before she started back into that gruesome cave. And yet, perhaps, the spirits of other adventurous natures were summoning her to follow them.

One passage was larger than the others. Jack certainly thought she saw stones that shone like gold lying near its mouth. It was separated from the main tunnel by a gully, across which some planks had been laid. With a lighted match in her hand and gazing upward, Jack stepped on the forward end of a plank. In a flash her light went out

and she fell back with a heavy thud. Her weight on the loose plank had caused it to rise up, striking her in the forehead with terrific force. Fortunately, she had fallen clear of the gully, but her body lay in the shadow out of the reach of any light that might come from the mouth of the cave. She suffered no pain; the blow had been too swift and sure, stunning her into silence and complete unconsciousness.

"Oo! Ooo! Oooo!" Jim whistled through his fingers nearly a quarter of a mile away. "Cheer up, Jack, I'm coming at last," he shouted, a few yards farther on. His conscience had begun to trouble him, and he was quite prepared to find Jack cross at having been forced to wait for him more than half an hour. Jim had not consulted his watch at the moment of his departure, but he was fairly certain that he had been gone some time, and that they must hurry off at once if they were to be with Ruth and the girls by an early bedtime.

Jim whistled and called all the way to the three pine cone hills. He presumed he would have to make his peace with his companion by telling her that he had discovered other visitors to the old mine within a very short

time. There were evidences of their presence everywhere in the vicinity, and they had not been idle curiosity seekers, but men with a mission. Whether they had given up the hunt for gold and gone away from the neighborhood of the mine for good, Jim could not tell. This was one of the reasons why he had prowled around so long. He had gone to all the likely spots near by, where a party of miners might be camping, thinking he might run across them, but not one of them had turned up.

Pretty soon, Jim discovered that Jack and Carlos were not in the spot where he left them, but he did not yet feel uneasiness. He circled around the three hills; he went a short distance into the thicket of pine trees, making as much racket as possible; he gave the long cowboy call of the Rainbow Ranch. And then Jim’s blue eyes turned black with anger and his sun-tanned skin grew red. He was exceedingly angry with Jack and Carlos, he was frightened, and an inner voice reminded him that if anything had happened to them he was to blame for leaving them so long alone.

But what could have happened?—for no one else had come near the place.

Jim saw Jack's footprints leading to the entrance of the cave, but his own and the Indian boy's were alongside them, and as they had rushed to look in the mine the first moment of their arrival he did not think to search for fresh tracks. And yet, for an instant, Jim had an odd premonition urging him toward the deserted mine.

The wind was now blowing hard across the plains; and the sun was slipping down to the line of the far horizon, not in a crimson glow, but in a piled-up mass of smoke—gray clouds lit with flame-colored sparks. Jim watched it uneasily. A summer storm was coming up after their week of perfect weather, and Jack, who knew the signs of the weather as well as any backwoodsman, had probably set off with Carlos for their camp, expecting him to overtake them. There was no other explanation for their disappearance. Once Jim walked irresolutely toward the mouth of the mine; then he turned, quickly moving off along the trail, wondering how far his companions would be able to travel before he reached them. Within twenty yards he halted, swung himself about and, in spite of his worry and haste, strode back to the open mine, where he had once vainly tried to find

his fortune. Jim did not know exactly why he returned; he never dreamed that either Jack or Carlos could be inside, but he had to obey the impulse that first prompted him.

The great hole in the hillside was blacker than ever, and Jim felt a shudder of repulsion as he gazed into it. He had always hated his old subterranean existence of digging into the earth for her treasures, when everywhere on her broad plains the fruit and flowers and grasses offered an equal opportunity and a fuller and higher meaning to life.

"Jack! Jack!" Jim called weakly, down on his knees at the gaping mouth of the tunnel, trying to grow more accustomed to the darkness and crying Jack's name, not because he thought her near, but because he was filled with a vague foreboding.

There was no answer out of the grim darkness. Jack could give no sign of her presence, and the black shadow into which she had fallen hid the outline of her prostrate body.

Suddenly a boom of distant thunder sounded from the far side of the world, and Jim Colter sprang quickly to his feet, for he knew how swiftly storms travel across the western plains, and he feared Jack and Carlos might wait for him in the dangerous shelter of the trees.

Faster than he had run in many a long day he left the neighborhood of the unlucky mine.

A little later Carlos appeared at the opening of the pine woods, his brown face scratched, his breath coming unevenly, with his gun on his square, lean shoulder, and a little bunch of a feathery or furry something tucked under his arm. He did not linger as Jim had; he believed at once that his companions had given him up, and sped on as fast as his weary brown legs could carry him along the path which had brought them to the place of the pine cone hills. Carlos had wandered too far into the woods and had lost his way, but now he hoped to overtake the other adventurers and in some way to make his peace.

When Jack opened her eyes it was nearly dark outside the mine as well as in. She lay quite still, feeling a dull pain in her head and an aching numbness in her body. "Olive! Jean! Ruth!" she called fretfully. "I'm ill. Why don't somebody come to me?" She thought she had wakened in the middle of the night in her bed at Rainbow Lodge. Poor Jack put out her hand to touch Jean, who usually slept with her, and her fingers closed on some loose mud and gravel. She held it for a moment and struggled to sit

up, but her head ached harder than ever, and she reached back to find her lost pillow. There was only the earth to touch again, and slowly her consciousness returned. Jack stumbled to her feet and made for the faint light at the tunnel entrance. She took a few uncertain steps and sank down in a little heap on the outside at the foot of one of the hills. Drops of rain were falling, and the wind whistled through the tops of the tallest pine trees and swirled around the crests of the lonely hills. “Jim! Jim! surely you haven’t left me!” Jack cried aloud. She was not usually timid or nervous, but the deserted place had alarmed her when she came to it early in the afternoon. Now she was alone in it, and about to face a fierce summer storm. Dulled by the pain in her head and by hunger and thirst, for Jim had carried the food and water bottle away in his pockets, she was uncertain as to how she had come to the mine and whether she would ever be able to keep to the return trail.

Jack’s face was white and her expression unusual, while just over her temple there was an ugly bruise, and she did not feel able to think clearly. Once she put her hand to her head and was surprised to find her hair

damp with wisps of wet curls streaking her forehead. Then she wondered what had become of her hat. An instant later she knew she had dropped it off her head when she fell inside the mine, but nothing would have induced her to go in again to find it. If Jim came back, perhaps he or Carlos would get it for her. Sometimes she was not certain of whether Jim and Carlos had just gone away for a few minutes or whether she had been waiting for them a great many hours. Then she pictured them back at their tent in the green place by the quiet stream, and wondered what they would do when she did not come.

It began to rain harder and faster in big pelting drops; lumps of hail beat down on Jack's shoulders and unprotected head. She ran to the woods to hide, but the place was so sodden and wet and ghostly in the twilight that she would not enter it. There was nothing to do but to try to find her way back to camp alone. Jack thought her head ached less and her decision a wise one. She did not realize that her friends could return to the old mine for her, but once missing the trail back to them she would be utterly lost in the wilderness. Jack recalled that several miles

ahead there was a deep gorge with high walls on either side of it, and that she and Jim and Carlos had followed a path at the side of this ravine for a part of their journey. She would strike out across the open country, feeling sure that its high walls could soon be seen rising like a wall of mist beyond the rain.

Flying along on feet unconscious of fatigue, fighting through the storm and darkness and calling aloud when she had the strength, in about an hour Jack reached the ravine. No actual sight of the trail had guided her, but an instinctive feeling for the right direction. Now she sat down for a few minutes in the shelter of an overhanging rock, hoping the storm would blow over or that Jim would find her. But the thunder crashed on, and the wind in the jagged rocks of the ravine moaned and sighed like lost souls wandering in the walled chambers of the canyons, crying for release. Had she ever been rash enough to say she loved the splendid western storms? Jack asked herself. Yes, even in her terror and loneliness she realized there was something magnificent and awe-inspiring in their sudden fury and abandon, as though nature, yielding to a burst of elemental passion,

poured forth her anger on the earth in the sweeping rain and furious charges of electricity.

When half an hour passed, the young girl crept out of her hiding place. Perhaps the storm was less severe; anyhow, she would rather face any fate than remain in the gorge all night. It was now too dark to see anything except the vague outlines of rocks and bunches of low shrubs. For a moment Jack stood still, trying to remember whether she should turn to the right or left, and straining her eyes to catch sight of a familiar object that might help her to decide. Then she moved off in exactly the wrong direction, with each step getting farther and farther away from her friends and shelter.

Trained to a knowledge of animal life in the plains of the great West, Jacqueline knew the call of almost every wild beast that is still native to the uncivilized portions of the western states. After walking for another hour, a sound filled her with horror. It was the low cry of a cougar! A thicket of trees and underbrush bordered one side of her path; on the other, lay the deep hollow of the ravine. And it had just begun to dawn on Jack that she was going in the wrong

direction; she had passed by no such dense shrubbery in her morning journey. But this was not the time to turn back, nor must she show hesitation or fear, well knowing that the wild creature behind her would dog the footsteps of a solitary traveler, keeping only a short distance away, like a hungry wolf, and though a coward at heart, spring upon her if she showed weakness or defeat.

Digging her nails in the palms of her hands, Jacqueline crashed on, shouting when she could. A little while before, she had felt ill and deadly tired; now, forgetting both, her old courage revived. In the tragedies of the afternoon, her rifle had been forgotten and left outside the mine, but the big cat back of her would never dare attack her if she kept steadily on, frightening it by loud shouting and trampling.

How far Jack walked that night she never knew. There were times when the cougar kept back of her, then he seemed to be walking along by her side in the shelter of the thicket. Now and then Jack believed he slipped in front of her, crouching in a clump of underbrush, but she never once caught sight of the big furtive cat, though she was always conscious of the presence slinking near

her. If it is necessary to prove that the modern American girl still has the nerve and fortitude of her pioneer grandmother, Jacqueline Ralston proved it that night. Not for a moment did she falter in her long march in the darkness.

A few hours before daylight the rain suddenly ceased and the stars came out as though the storm had not interrupted the usual hour of their appearance. Now Jack could rest at last! Having come through the wooded place, her enemy no longer pursued her. There were no more rocks ahead. She had reached the end of the gorge; the country beyond was a well-nigh unbroken plain.

A few yards farther on the young girl spied, like a dim sentinel, the outline of a solitary tree with its close, low branches sweeping the ground. Even in the darkness of night she knew a comfortable shelter could be found in it, for its beautiful boughs extended in a solid mass of foliage from its crown to its base, so the rain could scarcely have soaked through them. Jack crawled into the cradle-shaped branches and lay down to wait for the dawn and whatever the new day might bring forth, wondering if she were too tired to care what happened to her or if

she had earned any shadow of right to the title Carlos had once given her: "The Girl Who Was Never Afraid."

It never dawned on her that sleep could come; but before the lamps in the sky went out she had journeyed to that dim country where we find strength for the next day's need.

CHAPTER X

BY THE WAYSIDE TENT

HARDLY had the three more adventurous members of the caravan party turned their backs on their wayside tent for their trip to the far-off gold mine, when Ruth, Jean, Olive and Frieda were seized with a furious attack of housewifely energy. Everything was routed out of the tent and wagon. A flapping line of blankets hung on Jim's best lasso, which was stretched from a tree to a tent pole. Then the girls collected their laundry and carried it down to the brook. The water of the stream was so clear that every pebble shone under it like a jewel, and the sand was as white as the sand of the sea. Over a shimmering pool a broad, flat rock formed a comfortable platform.

Jean and Ruth got down on their knees on this stone, swashing their clothes up and down and smearing them with big bars of soap, like the laundresses in Holland, until

the clear water of the brook was a mass of iridescent soap bubbles.

Olive and Frieda rinsed and squeezed and spread the clothes out on the grass or hung them picturesquely over the low bushes. At the end of their labors, Frieda and Jean started a shadow dance with a big red tablecloth which Ruth had washed none too clean. Jean flapped it from one end, Frieda swirled it from the other; it flew up in the air like a red ballon and collapsed just as suddenly. Ruth and Olive rested in a patch of sunshine watching them. Suddenly Jean attempted to twist her unwieldy scarf into graceful curves about Frieda, but instead, tripped her up, and the little girl lay in a heap of helpless laughter on the grass. Straightway, Jean flung herself down beside her, beginning to unwind her long braids of hair.

"Ruth, make Frieda let me wash her hair," Jean urged. "She doesn't look like our pretty blond baby any more, but a poor, neglected 'orfling.' I am sure if she lies down flat on the rock, I can manage so she won't tumble into the brook."

Frieda crawled out of Jean's embrace, looking quite unresigned to the experience ahead of her. "You shan't do any such

thing, Jean Bruce," she protested; "you'll get gallons of soap in my eyes and make me all sandy."

Jean struck a dramatic attitude. "Frieda Ralston, if you will let me make you beautiful, I will give you all my share of the gold that Jim and Jack bring back from the mine," she exclaimed.

Frieda shook her head. "They won't bring any gold," she said firmly.

"But you'll feel lots better, Frieda," Ruth begged.

Frieda saw that the weight of opinion was against her, and, besides, she was vain of her hair and did wish it to look pretty again, so she gave in gracefully.

"All right, Jean, if you will ride horseback with me all day to-morrow and make Olive and Jack ride in the wagon, I guess I will let you," she conceded.

Jean had the sleeves of her shirtwaist rolled up past her dimpled elbows and the collar of her white blouse tucked in at the neck. She felt as much at home by the wayside pool as she did in Rainbow Lodge. Frieda was wrapped in a white towel like a shawl. Only once, toward the end of the washing operation, did she utter a squeal of

indignation, and Ruth and Olive immediately ran to her rescue.

"Jean's caught a minnow in my hair," she insisted wrathfully, with her face very red. "I saw the tiniest one sailing down the brook by me, and then all at once it disappeared, and I am sure I can feel it wriggling on my neck."

Ruth made a careful examination of the clean yellow hair before Frieda would be reconciled. Then she led the small girl away to a sunshiny spot, spreading her hair over her shoulders to dry, until she looked like the original "Miss Goldilocks" in the old fairy tale. Frieda was given a piece of scalloping, which she had been working on for weeks, to keep her quiet.

"Jean," Ruth called a minute later, "do you mind staying here with Frieda for a little while? Olive and I have to go foraging for some chips before we can make the fire burn for luncheon, naughty Carlos having deserted us. Do you think you can make yourself lovely and keep an eye on things at the same time?"

Jean nodded peacefully from her throne of rocks, though a minute before she had been hot from her exertions and angry at Frieda's

ingratitude. "Sure, as my name is Jean Bruce, I can," she answered cheerfully, letting down the masses of her dark-brown hair. She made such a pretty picture that Ruth watched her smilingly for a few minutes. She thought she loved all the girls alike now, but Jack and Olive were her friends and Jean and Frieda her children. She guessed her business of playing chaperon to the ranch girls would not be an easy one, if ever Jean got away from their western life into the gay society world of which she dreamed and talked.

But no frivolous ideas of a society existence now engaged Miss Bruce's attention, and she had no more idea of being disturbed than if she had been the original lady in the Garden of Eden. Jean was indeed the nut-brown maid of whom old-fashioned poets loved to write. Her hair had no golden tones in it; only the rich browns of the autumn woods, and her eyes matched it in color. She was paler than the other ranch girls, with a soft, healthy pallor, although to-day a little tanned and rosier than usual from her week's trip in the caravan.

Frieda glanced around to see Jean leaning over the water with her hair covering her

face. It did not seem worth while to disturb her, so without a word, Frieda slipped away to their tent to search for more thread for her sewing.

Jean could not hear very well at this time had she spoken, for the brook made a roary, gurgling noise of its own in her ears, and her head swam from being held upside down so long.

"Crunch, crunch, crunch." Some one was marching along the side of the stream right in her direction. Jean did not trouble to take her hair out of the water or to look around. Of course it could be no one but Frieda!

"Well, I never in all my life!" she heard a perfectly strange masculine voice exclaim. "I know I have walked straight into fairy land, and you must be the queen who has brought all this magic to pass over night, for I passed this stream just two days ago and there wasn't a sign of a tent or a caravan or a princess anywhere around."

Jean flung back her long, brown hair with a gasp of sheer surprise, and the drops of crystal water showered around her like the diamonds that fell from the mouth of the good sister in the fairy story.

"I have been washing my hair," she announced to the strange youth, and then because her explanation was so obvious, they both laughed. "You see, I hadn't the faintest idea anybody could turn up in this wilderness except us," she explained, not very grammatically. "We are making a caravan trip through the state."

"I suppose I ought to say I am awfully sorry I intruded," the young fellow answered. "Of course, you know, I would say it if I had bobbed into a lady's boudoir unexpectedly, but I am so glad to see some one in this out-of-the-way place that I haven't a social fib at my disposal. Don't you think you could let me stop to rest and perhaps talk to you a few minutes?"

Jean drew herself up in an effort to look as dignified and unapproachable as she felt sure Jack and Olive would have done under the same circumstances. Far be it from either of them to engage in a friendly conversation with a stranger, even in a trackless waste; but to save her life Jean couldn't keep her eyes from shining mischievously. The water was trickling down her back until her shoulders were damp through her shirtwaist. Knowing she looked dreadfully foolish, she

could not make up her mind to do anything so unattractive as deliberately to squeeze the water out of her hair or roll up her head in a towel before this handsome young fellow.

He was somewhat older than Donald Harmon or Frank Kent, and his eyes were as blue and his hair as golden as Siegfried's, thought romantic Jean, if only he were dressed in a suit of silver armor instead of dust-covered corduroys. The traveler had a knapsack strapped over his shoulders and a gun in his hand; his whole appearance suggested a long tramp.

Jean gazed at him meaningly. Ordinary intelligence might suggest to him that he turn his back for a few minutes while she repaired her damaged toilet, but the young fellow evidently had no such amiable intention. He seated himself by the edge of the brook a few feet from Jean. "My name is Ralph Merrit. I'm a mining engineer," he announced briefly.

Jean slightly inclined her wet head. "If you don't mind, I must beg you to excuse me?" she returned as haughtily as even Jack could have desired. Suddenly she made up her mind to snub this uncomfortably stupid acquaintance. Off she marched in as stately

a fashion as possible, when one considers her damp, flowing locks and the fact that she had to pick her way through their various articles of laundry spread on the grass.

Inside the security of the tent Jean rubbed her hair vigorously and waved it energetically through the opening at the door, so it might dry as soon as possible. Frieda stationed herself outside the tent so as to communicate all possible information about the intruder to Jean.

"Has he gone yet?" Jean inquired for the fifth time in ten minutes.

Frieda shook her head. "He isn't going for a long time, Jeanie, I believe," she returned. "He is sitting by our brook just as though he never means to leave it. Now he has gotten up and is drinking some water. Now he is washing his face," she whispered excitedly, "and is taking a mirror out of his pocket to prink."

Jean and Frieda giggled and Jean joined her little cousin out of doors. She had piled her hair in a loose, damp mass on top of her head, for she was now determined, with Frieda for a chaperon, gently but firmly to persuade the young man to leave their Adamless Eden.

"Oh," said Jean, as, holding fast to Frieda's

hand, she got within speaking distance of the stranger, "are you still here?" As there was nothing in the world to interrupt Miss Bruce's vision of the young man, even if she had been hopelessly near-sighted, he was obliged to understand her meaning. Coloring hotly under his already rosy skin, he got up.

"I thought you wouldn't mind if I rested a bit," he explained. "I have been tramping around this neighborhood for the last two days and I was counting on slowing up when I got back to this place. I need to fill my water bottles. And look here, I wonder if you would give me something to eat. You don't know it, but it is a custom for travelers of the open road to help each other out."

Ralph Merrit knew he had never seen a girl whose expression changed as swiftly as Jean's. A minute before, her eyes had been cool and reserved, and now they were brimming pools of kindness.

"Oh, I am so sorry you are hungry. I'll get you something to eat right away," she replied sympathetically. "If you will stay until Cousin Ruth and Olive come back I know they will invite you to lunch. I am sure you will tell how you happened to turn

up here, and, of course, I can see you are a gentleman," she ended.

Ralph's face flushed gratefully, "You are awfully kind," he murmured, and then all at once Frieda saved the situation from further embarrassment. Suddenly she thrust into the young man's hand a large, red apple and a cracker, which she had concealed in her apron pocket. She had been foraging on her own account inside their tent, but had forgotten her provisions in the interest of Jean's discovery.

Ten minutes later Ruth and Olive appeared on the scene, swinging a large basket of chips and pine cones between them. In amazement they set down their basket and stared at a three cornered group composed of Jean, Frieda and a strange young man, seated comfortably on the ground, laughing and talking and lunching on their best jam and pickles and bread.

CHAPTER XI

“WHERE’S JACK?”

RALPH MERRIT explained his unexpected appearance to Ruth in a far more conventional fashion than Jean had required. He was a native of Chicago, a graduate of a mining school, and had come west to see if he could make his living by testing the gold deposits in the mining camps in the northwest states. Two miners had induced him to go with them to an old mine not far away to see if their discoveries of gold deposits were of value. When the find turned out to be no good, the men had slipped away, leaving him, and not only refusing to pay what they had promised for his services, but stealing all the money he had with him. For the past two days the young man had been scouring the country for the thieves, but he now believed they had gotten to some town and were safely out of his reach.

“I should be awfully grateful to you, Miss Drew, if you would tell me the way to the

nearest village," Ralph Merrit said at the end of his story. "I am green about this part of the country and don't know in what direction to move on."

Ruth shook her head. "I am afraid I don't know either," she confessed, "but if you will spend the day here with us until our guide, Mr. Colter, comes back, he will tell you anything you wish to know."

Ralph accepted the invitation gratefully, although he hardly guessed what a concession it represented. A year before, when Ruth Drew left Vermont, she had never spoken to a man in her life without a formal introduction, and now she was inviting a stranger to spend the day with her and the three girls in the woods. But Ruth never doubted the story Ralph Merrit had told her for a moment, although it was an unusual one. No one who was a judge of character ever doubted Ralph. He was a straightforward, manly, determined fellow, with a strong will and a sense of humor—one of the most delightful combinations in the world—and from the first hour of their acquaintance he was a special favorite with Ruth and later with Jim Colter.

For several hours, Ralph made himself a

useful visitor, insisting on bringing in fresh stores of wood, as he assured his hostesses their stock would never last over night, and they would desire to keep up a particularly brilliant fire as a beacon light to the wanderers from camp.

About four o'clock in the afternoon Ruth suggested that the five of them take a walk to find out the source of the little stream, which made such a wonderful oasis in the stretch of sandy desert. After a few miles, Ruth, Olive and Frieda sat down to rest, while Jean and Ralph carried on their explorations. They had caught a splendid lot of fish, but Ralph had his gun with him and hoped to get some game for their supper. The young man and girl had talked to each other for the past few hours, but now they seemed to feel well enough acquainted to keep silent and enjoy the exquisite beauty of the scenery. They had wandered to the source of the brook. Trickling down from the base of a low hill, it was circled by a grove of cottonwood and spruce trees. Jean and Ralph hid in the underbrush and got softly down on their knees so as to make no possible noise, for they saw a few yards ahead a delicate, dappled fawn, with its nose deep in

the clear water. Its sides were of a light gray and brown, its legs like slender staves, and its long ears as soft and sensitive as any created thing. The scene was so beautiful that Jean's eyes grew suddenly misty with tears.

Ralph also felt a quiver of excitement stiffen his arm. His companion was behind him and out of any possible danger, the fawn was in direct range of his gun and as yet unconscious of his presence.

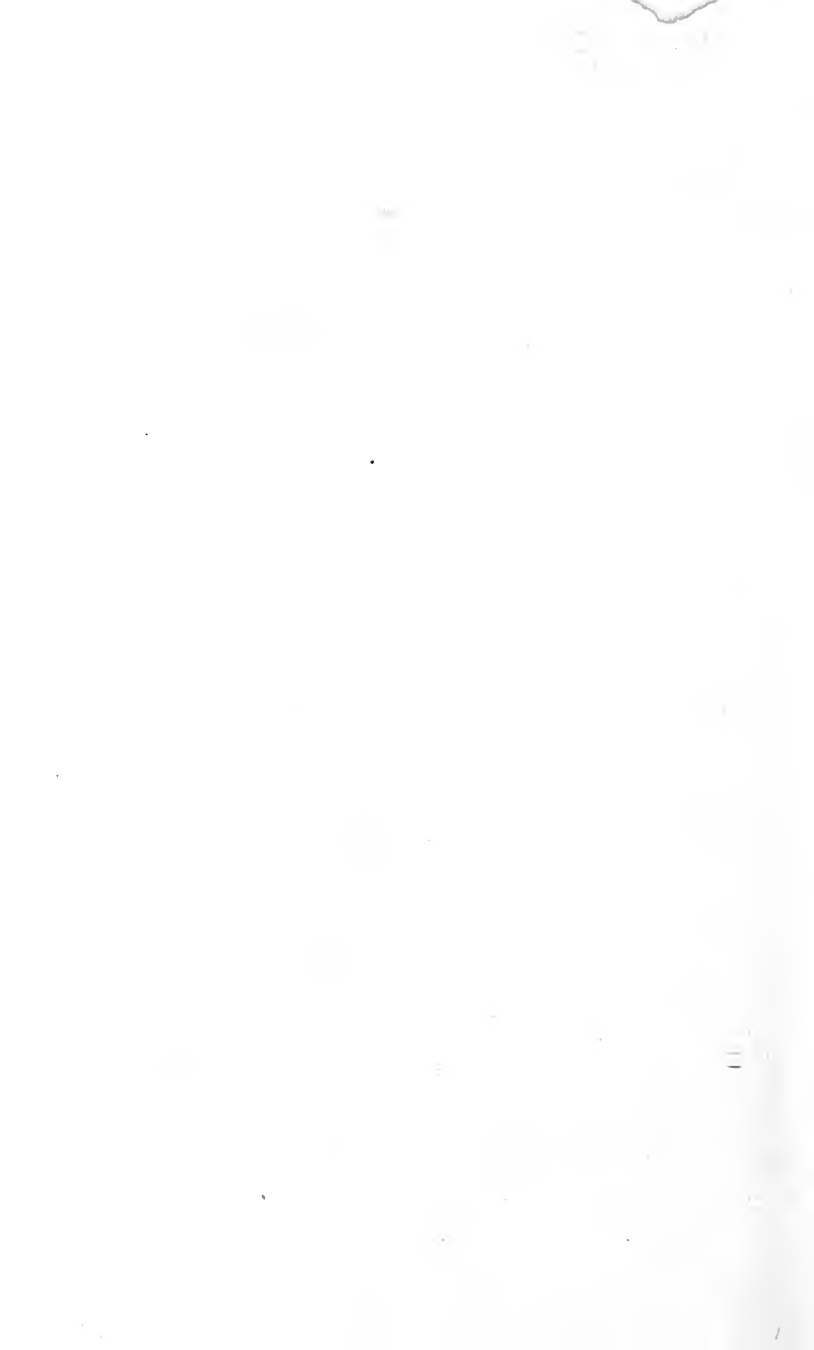
The young man lifted his gun, took direct aim, and his fingers pressed the trigger. At the same instant the gun kicked up in the air, exploded and the shot went wide of its mark. For one quivering instant the fawn gazed at the hunter, its big brown eyes full of terror and reproach, and then with a bound was off through the trees and out of sight.

"How could you, Miss Bruce?" Ralph demanded indignantly, turning on Jean. "If you hadn't struck the butt of my gun I should have gotten that deer and we would have had fresh meat for a week." He stopped abruptly. Jean's eyes were as wide open and brown and frightened as the fawn's and her body trembled just as delicately.

"How could *you*?" she replied brokenly.



"How COULD YOU, MISS BRUCE?" RALPH DEMANDED
INDIGNANTLY.



"I couldn't bear to have you kill that lovely, gentle thing. I can't help it, I hate people who kill things. But if you think you will be hungry because of what I did, I'll get Ruth and Jim to let me give you some of my share of our food in the caravan," and Jean marched back to her friends and would have nothing more to say to her companion for the rest of the day.

Just before tea time, the storm that had overtaken the travelers to the deserted mine gathered over the little party, who were resting near the tent. Ruth and the girls tried their best to fight down their fears, but their lips and eyes asked the same question: "How were Jim and Jack and Carlos to fight their way back to them through the darkness and rain and wind with only the light of the small lantern Jim had taken with him when they set out?"

Jean and Olive got a hasty supper, while Ralph Merrit lashed the tent ropes more closely to the ground, found what shelter he could for the horses, and made a canopy of pine branches over the fire, so that the down-pour of rain should not put it out. It was about dusk when he found Ruth and Frieda standing outside their tent door watching

with white, nervous faces the big clouds roll together in a black mass.

"Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable, Miss Drew?" Ralph asked. "You have been awfully good to me, and I can't tell you how I appreciate it. Why, this day with you has been almost like running across my own people here in this wilderness. But if there is nothing I can do, I had best move on to find some sort of shelter for the night before the storm gets worse."

Ruth put out her hand, impulsively clutching Ralph's coat sleeve. "Please, please don't leave us until Mr. Colter and Jack and Carlos return," she begged. "I told them I would not be worried if they did not get back until quite late, but this storm makes us feel so much more lonely and frightened."

Ralph patted Ruth's hand reassuringly. "Of course I won't go if you would like me to stay," he answered cheerfully. "And you mustn't be alarmed. I'll watch the fire to keep it from going out, and when your friends return, I'll roost in a tree, like 'Monsieur Chantecler,' and wake you first thing in the morning."

Ruth smiled, and Olive, who had come out of the tent with Jean, looked less forlorn;

but Jean, although she was devoutly glad they were not to be left alone, could not cheer up. She walked apart from the others, not wishing them to guess how uneasy she felt about Jack. Of course nothing was going to happen, but she wished she had not accused Jack of being selfish the day before.

Ralph Merrit came over and stood silently at Jean's side for a moment. He felt twice her age and was actually eight years older.

"I did not know you would mind my shot this afternoon," he began stiffly in the fashion in which a man usually apologizes. "If you had been brought up in a city and were unused to hunting I might have understood your feeling. As it was I——"

Jean's cheeks flushed in the somber twilight. Already the first drops of rain were falling. Ruth was calling them inside the tent.

"I hope I have not been rude," she said. "I ought to have explained to you that I can never bear to see anything killed. My cousin, Jack Ralston, and the overseer of our ranch, Jim Colter, both think I am awfully silly because I never go hunting with them even when they are after wild game, though I can shoot pretty well. But when a bird or animal is full of motion and maybe joy, why,

to see it stiff and cold all of a sudden and to know you can never make it alive again——” Jean’s voice broke off abruptly. She did not care to show emotion to a stranger.

“I understand,” Ralph answered slowly. “I believe I would like to have my sister feel that way. I know you have not asked it of me, and we may never meet again, but so long as I live I shall never kill anything unless I positively need it for food, or am trying to protect some one.”

For several hours Ruth, the girls and their guest huddled inside their tent waiting for the storm to pass and the wanderers to return. The rain beat in until their waterproof cloaks were hung over the slits and openings, and then, in spite of the coldness of the night outside, the air in the tent grew close and heavy. Ruth did her best to keep up a conversation with Ralph, but Jean and Olive sat on a pile of sofa cushions with their arms about each other, waiting, listening for some sound that would tell them the wayfarers were almost home. Frieda had fallen asleep in a weary lump on a cot, with a tear of sheer lonesomeness for Jack not yet dry on her pink cheek.

Suddenly the girls jumped to their feet

and Frieda rolled off the cot. From afar off they heard Jim's familiar whistle and long, cheerful call. Ralph Merrit rushed out to pile the fire with the pine cones and logs they had been keeping dry inside the tent. Jean and Olive lit the extra candles they had been saving all evening. The rain having almost ceased, Ruth flung a mackintosh about her and ran forth to follow the sound of Jim's voice.

"Home at last!" thought Jim Colter happily, his worry and uncertainty slipping from him as he caught the distant gleam of the camp-fire. For many miles after leaving the mine he had hurried on, expecting each moment to overtake Jack and Carlos. Then fearing they might have lost their way, he turned aside at every doubtful place along the trail, searching and calling their names until he was hoarse. Not only was he torn with anxiety at the loss of his fellow-truants, but uneasy about Ruth and the girls alone in a tent in a fierce summer tempest. Now his journey was almost over, he believed Jack and Carlos had traveled fast and were safe within their own shelter. The vision of Ruth's pretty figure battling toward him through the wind seemed a good omen.

Both of them stretched out their hands. "Where's Jack?" they cried in the same breath. And Ruth was glad she had caught Jim's big hands in her warm ones, for the great, self-controlled overseer of the Rainbow Ranch shook like a child in a chill. "Aren't Jack and Carlos with you?" he queried hoarsely. And Ruth shook her head, drawing him, stumbling like a blind man, to their camp-fire.

All night long she sat by the fire with him while the girls and Ralph Merrit made coffee and walked back and forth from the tent to them. No one thought of going to bed. Jim wished to be off at once to recommence his search, but Ruth persuaded him to wait till daylight. For his sake she pretended to believe that Jack was too clever not to have found a refuge for herself and Carlos for the night. They were glad that the little Indian boy had run away with Jim and Jack to the mine, for it was better that Jack should not be alone.

At the first streak of dawn a light footfall sounded some distance away. Jim and Ruth and Ralph Merrit sprang up from the smouldering fire. "It's Jack!" Ruth cried happily, so that Jean and Olive and Frieda heard her,

and came running pale and breathless from the shelter of the tent.

Stealing up the pathway of light made by the first streak of rose color in the sky was little brown Carlos, but he walked alone.

"Where's Jack?" called everybody this time. And Carlos shook his head uncertainly. He could not understand. There stood "The Big White Chief," and certainly he must have brought their companion back with him. Why did they ask *him* about "The Girl Who Was Never Afraid"? He was only a little boy, even though an Indian; he was hungry and cold and tired and had found his way all alone through the darkness of night in a strange country, and no one, not even "The Princess," seemed glad to see him. Carlos blinked, but his bronze, statuesque face showed absolutely no emotion. He dropped a little gray ball of fur on the ground, which Frieda picked up with a cry of pleasure.

CHAPTER XII

CARLOS MAKES GOOD

DON'T, please, Mr. Colter!" Olive faltered.

Frieda clutched at Jean's skirts, with big tears in her eyes, and Jean stared at the scene with a frightened face. Ralph Merrit had walked some distance away and Ruth had gone back to their tent, worn out by her second disappointment over Jack's failure to return. The three girls who remained had rarely seen anyone so angry as Jim Colter. He had not spoken when Carlos first returned; now he made the boy stand up before him and give an account of himself.

Ruth was crying when she heard a swish of a whip through the air and thought she caught the sound of a sob from Frieda. She listened again. Jim was speaking in a voice she did not know he could use, and for a minute she turned quite cold.

"You deserter," the voice said harshly. "I forgave you for running away from camp

this morning, when I told you to stay behind, and then when I leave you for an instant you turn traitor the second time. There is no blood of an Indian Chief in your veins; they at least keep faith with their friends." Swish! Ruth knew the whip had struck again.

She slipped quietly on the scene. Olive and Frieda were both crying, and Jean was biting her trembling lips. Jim's face was crimson and his blue eyes blazed as only a man's can who is slow to anger. Only Carlos stood as still as stone. He had but one thin shirt over his slender body, but when he staggered it was from fatigue not pain. He bore his punishment with the silence and fortitude of an Indian warrior.

Jim had lifted his stick for the third time and this blow he meant to make the severest of all. A small, white hand closed over the raised whip. "Stop, Mr. Jim," Ruth said quietly. "Carlos is a child and whatever he has done he is too tired for you to punish him now. I think he did not mean to desert Jack any more than you did." Ruth did not intend her words as a reproach, but Jim's arm dropped quickly to his side and he turned so pale that she was frightened.

"Take Carlos away and see that he has something to eat," he ordered Olive, "and, Jean, make Frieda stop crying." Without glancing at Ruth, Jim picked up a flask of beef tea, which he had had prepared for Jack's return, and without another word set out to search for Jack.

A little later Ralph Merrit proposed that he too should go out to reconnoiter. Having also met with misfortune at "Miner's Folly," he knew the country all about the neighborhood. The young man was saying good-by to Ruth and Frieda, when Jean's face, paler and more wistful than usual, appeared over her chaperon's shoulder.

"Ruth, dear, Olive and I want to go with Mr. Merrit to look for Jack," she begged. "Yes, I know it is awfully selfish of us to leave you, but we are perfectly worn out with waiting. Besides, Jack don't know Mr. Merrit and he will never be able to persuade her to return with him."

Ralph laughed. "Frieda, won't you give me the blue ribbon on your hair to prove to your sister I have been a guest of the caravan party?" he asked. "Though, of course, I don't believe she would be so obstinate."

Frieda solemnly unwound the band of ribbon which she used to keep her hair out of her eyes, and Ralph tied it in his button-hole, where the ends floated out like blue pennants; but understanding their impatience, Ruth let Olive and Jean go to assist in the search for Jack.

It was now broad daylight; the birds were singing and the sun shining with the peculiar brilliancy that follows a rain-washed night. Ruth put Frieda to bed, as the little girl was exhausted; then she persuaded Carlos to lie down on her own cot. The boy had said nothing, only he never let go the gray ball of fur which he had brought home from the woods, but kept it pressed close to him. Ruth had no idea what animal Carlos had found, though it had a sharp, pointed nose, restless eyes, and every now and then tore at something with its baby teeth. Hidden near an old tree in the woods back of the gold mine, Carlos had run across a baby wolf cub, and having a curious fellowship with animals, had brought it back with him, hoping he might be allowed to raise it as a dog.

The ranch girls knew of Carlos' strange communion with birds and beasts. They would come at his call and eat out of his

brown hand, but it did not seem remarkable to them, as the boy had lived always in the open and was only a half-tamed creature himself.

Ruth left the children alone in the tent. Fifteen minutes later she returned and Carlos had again disappeared. This time she made up her mind that the Indian boy must be sent back to his own people, since they could do nothing to stop his disobedience. But Olive had been trying to teach the little fellow to read and write, and in straightening up her bed Ruth found a piece of torn yellow paper. On it Carlos had written in quaint, scrawling letters: "I Go Girl Never Afrid. Find Not, Come Back Not."

Ruth put the letter away; her heart once more softened toward the lad, hoping for his sake that he might be the one to bring Jack to them.

But no one need have been troubled about Jack on this wonderful summer morning. Quite comfortably she awoke in her nest of branches to a bewildering chorus of song, a little stiff, of course; hungry and thirsty. But climbing out on the ground, she ran for half a mile until the soreness was out of her muscles and the surging blood warmed her

heart and cheeks. Jack took off her sweater, carrying it under her arm, the wind blew back her hair, which had the colors of the sun in it, her lips were open and full and a deep crimson. If ever any of the old-time pagan goddesses that one reads of in mythology sheds her influence over the modern girl, Jack had drawn some of her spirit from Diana. She looked as you might imagine Diana to have looked after she had spent the night hunting with her maidens in some lonely forest—fresh, brilliant and gay.

When Jack stopped to rest from her run she saw, near the rocky gorges and in many of the waste places, red cacti blooming against the gray buttes, like splashes of flame. Gathering a little she stuck it in her belt, but Jack hoped to discover a cactus plant of a different kind. Her father and Jim had taught her all they knew of the plants and flowers that grow in the American desert, for they wished her to be prepared for just such an emergency as had now befallen her. At first Jack kept close to the path at the side of the gorge, retracing the steps she had wrongly taken the night before. When she came beyond the thicket through which the cougar had followed her, a stretch of arid

country spread away to her right on this side the gorge. Standing in the desert with nothing about it but sand and sage brush, Jack spied the cactus she sought. It rose like a tree, with thick, bunchy leaves at its base, and dozens of clusters of small mustard-colored flowers on separate branches sticking out from its summit like the ribs of an umbrella.

The American aloe has been the salvation of many a traveler in the desert country of the West. Hurrying to it, Jack cut away some of the thick leaves and then settling herself comfortably in the sand she sucked the sap from the leaves until her throat was no longer parched and her hunger and thirst were both appeased.

She was resting, trying to make up her mind to go back to the ravine, where Jim would surely find her, when she heard a well-known whistle. It was not like the note of a bird, and yet it did not seem to come from a human throat, yet Jack recognized it at once. It was the odd sound Carlos made when calling to the birds in the woods or fields. The call had traveled a great distance in the clear morning air.

Jack clapped her hands loudly. "I am

coming, Carlos, I am coming," she cried; "wait for me." Then she ran back toward the edge of the cliff. She would have liked to cry out with pleasure when she first saw Carlos, but instead kept quite still.

The lad had made himself a whistle from a stalk of wild grass that grew like a reed. He was wandering along searching everywhere for Jack, yet beguiling his way with wonderful woodland noises which he made through his whistle. A robin sat perched on his black hair, several other birds fluttered over his head, afraid to alight and yet unwilling to leave him. If Jack had suggested the huntress Diana, Carlos looked like a follower of Pan. Surely in mythological days just such red-brown boys had accompanied the old wood god, making the weird and eerie music that caused a smile to hover ever on his wild face.

The caravan party, except Jim and the truants, were eating luncheon when Jack and Carlos burst in upon them. Jack flew to Ruth, flinging her arms about her and giving her a breathless hug. "It was all my fault, as usual," she explained, "but there is nothing the matter with me except a bruise on my forehead and an empty feeling in another

place." Jack stopped, suddenly discovering the presence of the stranger, Ralph Merrit.

Hugging Jack with one arm, Ruth respectfully shook hands with Carlos with the other. The small lad tried not to show emotion, but a light of triumph shone in his eyes. He and not the "Big White Chief" had found "The Girl Who Was Never Afraid." Now surely he would be forgiven the sin of his failure to keep faith.

Worn and haggard, Jim returned a few hours later to find his fellow-travelers engaged in cheerful conversation and seemingly forgetful of the strain.

"I hope nothing will happen to me again while we are on this trip," Jack remarked carelessly. "I thought last night in the storm that the gypsy who came to our ranch had surely put her curse on me. You know she announced that something would happen to me that would force me to depend on other people, and as I had to depend on Carlos to show me the way home to the caravan, perhaps the spell is past."

Olive, sitting next Jack, gave a shudder. She had never confessed how much she had thought of the woman's evil words to her, but Frieda, who was playing with the stones

Jack had brought back from the gold mine, made a quick turn in the conversation.

"Jean," she announced indignantly, "you told me you'd give me the gold Jim and Jack brought from the mine with them, and now they haven't brought any, because Ralph Merrit says these rocks are no better than other pebbles. I really did think they might find some gold, though I said I knew they wouldn't," she ended mournfully.

Jean laughed. "Same here, baby. I confess I thought maybe they would come home with a grand discovery and we would all be as rich as cream forever afterwards. Did you have any such idea in your head, Jack?"

Jack blushed. "Not really," she conceded; "but of course as soon as one hears anything about a gold mine, one goes quite crazy. Remember how we used to plan, when we were little girls, to run away and find the 'Pot of Gold at the End of the Rainbow' as soon as we grew up?"

Jean and Frieda nodded, but the entire party was soon busy with their plans for resuming their trip in the early morning. Jim asked Ralph Merrit to go along to the Yellowstone Park with them. The young man had been through the western reserve

once before, and since his experience with Jack, Jim thought it might be just as well to have another man to divide responsibilities for the remainder of the trip.

By nine o'clock the next day the caravaners had moved away from the quiet oasis in the desert, their tent had been folded up and the horses reluctantly driven from the fresh grass. The little place had become but a memory to its dwellers by the wayside.

CHAPTER XIII

ENTERING WONDERLAND

THE Forest of Arcady, Jim," Jean called gayly from her seat on the back of her pony. She and Olive, with Ralph Merrit walking beside them, had just climbed a steep road that led across the Continental Divide into the great park of the Yellowstone, called Yellowstone by the Indians many years ago, because its river ran like melted gold between massive stone walls, shading from palest lemon to a deep orange glow.

Behind its outriders the ranch girls' caravan moved slowly upward. They had been passing through tall pine forests that shut them in to a cathedral gloom, but beyond and farther down the hill Jean had just caught sight of a grove of quaking aspen trees with the sky above them shining as bright as sunny Italy. The grove looked like a great umbrella shop with its parasols open on parade, for the trees had circular

green tops growing high above the ground, and their straight, slender trunks were like white umbrella handles.

Jim cracked his whip in answer to Jean's speech and Jack waved her hat from the place next him; just behind them Ruth clutched at Frieda and Carlos to keep them from falling into the road in their efforts to see everything at once. Away to the right they could catch a faint glimpse of one of the long arms of Yellowstone Lake, and they meant to reach a hotel on its northern banks by twilight.

For the past ten days the caravan party had been moving almost steadily onward. Twice only had they stopped at small towns for mail, to buy fresh provisions and to get rid of some of the stains of travel. However, the entire party looked like a troupe of Spanish gypsies, some of them fair-haired and blue-eyed as the old Castilians, others dark as the Moors, but all with their complexions tanned to varying shades of brown from their weeks in the open air.

"Nature's Wonderland!" Jack spouted rapturously in the language of a guidebook. "Really, Ruth, the Park is even more beautiful than we dreamed, isn't it?"

But Jack ceased talking abruptly and Jim reined in his horses on a stretch of level road, while Olive and Jean slid gently down from their ponies' backs. The noise of their approach had frightened a band of almost a hundred antelopes, who were browsing in a near-by forest, and now they started off in a long, galloping run single file through the trees to a fertile green valley below.

When the deer were out of sight, Frieda flung a dimpled brown arm about Jim's neck. She wore a yellow straw bonnet with a blue ribbon on it, tied under her chin. Ruth had purchased the bonnet in one of the towns where they spent the night, for each member of the expedition was weary of crawling down from the wagon to pick up Frieda's lost hat. "Do let's rest here a few minutes, Jim," Frieda urged. "The horses have stopped, anyhow, and my legs are so tired dangling from the seat."

Ruth had let go her hold on the children for a few minutes, and without waiting for Jim's consent, by some sort of silent signal they both slipped over the wagon wheels and danced away. For hours they had been passing by every variety of beautiful wild flower, but this minute Frieda and Carlos

discovered an isolated hill crowned with jagged rocks and covered with bitter-root, whose delicate blossoms made the ground look like a carpet studded with small pink stars, leading to a giant's castle in the air.

It was not yet time for luncheon, but the caravaners were always hungry, and Ruth, Jean and Olive dragged a basket of sandwiches out of the wagon, while Jim Colter and Ralph Merrit led the horses away to search for water.

"Better look after the children, Jack," Ruth suggested carelessly.

Jack moved slowly toward the pink hill. She could see that Carlos had run lightly up it and was now crowing proudly from the peak of one of the highest rocks, while poor Frieda was crawling laboriously after him, fired with ambition and envy. Jack stopped a minute to laugh. Her small sister was so round and chubby, that even though she clung to the shrubs as she struggled upward, every now and then she would slip back almost as far as she had gone on.

"Don't try to go any farther, Frieda; come back to me," Jack cried warningly. But Carlos had leaped to another higher crag and was beckoning his companion to follow

him, so Frieda either didn't hear or wouldn't heed her elder sister; neither did she look upward toward the goal "to which she would ascend." Carlos vanished around another rock and was out of sight; he did not think to mention that there was a flat platform back of the first big rock and that it was already occupied. Suddenly from her position near the bottom of the hill, Jack saw an old goat thrust his head out over this rock and survey Frieda, with the long gray beard and the glittering eye of "The Ancient Mariner." He was evidently an old time resident of the Park and had no intention of sharing his retreat with an outside intruder.

"Frieda!" Jack halloed, now frightened and running up the hill as fast as she could, but she could hardly hope to come to the rescue in time.

Blue-eyed Frieda had crawled up the side of the crag toward the spot where the goat awaited her. Instead of a shout of triumph she gave a horrified gasp of terror, never having intended to invade the castle of the particular ogre she now beheld.

At this moment a tourist, who had been wandering idly around surveying the scenery, saw the little girl and the goat. He

laughed and moved quickly in their direction. Jack was also doing her level best to arrive before the tragedy, but the old goat preferred not to wait. He took a few steps forward, hunching his shoulders and sidling along, then with a snort of dignified rage and a shove of his shaggy gray head, he struck poor Frieda in the middle of her small person and sent her over the side of the rock down the hill, where she landed in a bed of the coveted bitter-root blossoms.

"If you won't cry, little girl, I'll give you something I have in my pocket," a strange gentleman said hurriedly, just as Frieda opened her mouth to bewail her misfortune. Not only was she injured in her feelings; she was hurt in other places as well, and her new bonnet hopelessly smashed in on one side. Too surprised to do anything but choke for a few seconds, Frieda let her preserver set her up on the ground and brush off some of the sand and twigs. He seemed a middle-aged man, quite as old as Jim, with iron-gray hair and dark eyes, and such a funny expression through his glasses, it was hard to tell whether he was smiling or sympathetic.

Jack now appeared and saw that her small sister was not seriously hurt. Just as she

started to thank her rescuer a vision of what they had just seen flashed between them. Swiftly Jack's gray eyes darkened, her lips curved and she burst into a peal of gay laughter, which the stranger echoed until he had to take out his handkerchief to wipe his eyeglasses.

Frieda gazed at them both indignantly, then the tears which had been nobly held back rushed down her pink cheeks like the streams from a spouting geyser.

"Oh, dear me, now you *are* crying and I told you I would give you something if you wouldn't!" the tourist remarked hastily. Down in his pocket went his hand, and before Frieda's and Jack's amazed eyes were displayed a handful of bright jewels, topaz and jasper, agate and garnets.

Jack shook her head decisively. "No, thank you," she said. "You are very kind, but they are much too valuable for Frieda to accept. We must say good-by; our friends are signaling us."

Mr. Peter Drummond laughed good-humoredly. "Please let her have one—they are not of value," he begged. "I just have a fancy for pretty stones, like a small boy, and these have all been found in the state of

Wyoming." Frieda's small hand closed suddenly over a shining bit of yellow jasper. Jack blushed, but there was no time for argument. Carlos had already sped down the hill and Jim was shouting to them. From the top of their caravan, as it took up its forward march, Jack and Frieda beheld the distinguished stranger still watching them, and waved their handkerchiefs to him in farewell.

Just before sunset the caravaners arrived in front of the hotel where they intended to spend the night. Yellowstone Lake lay a wonderful sheet of clear water at one side of them, but the travelers were weary of scenery and far more interested in the guests who crowded the hotel verandah. The women wore pretty afternoon toilets and the men white flannels, as though they were visitors at fashionable Newport homes instead of travelers in the heart of a wilderness.

"Great heavens, Ruth!" Jean murmured, as they dismounted and stood close together in a frightened group, "my legs feel as though they were going to give way under me and I am as bedraggled as any beggar maid. However are we going to have the courage to march across that wretched porch with all those people staring at us?"

"I don't know myself, Jean. I had no idea we would find so many visitors here," Ruth replied, vainly trying to straighten her traveling hat, which was considerably the worse for wear. Indeed the caravan party did look almost as disreputable as they felt in their dusty, travel-worn clothes, now brought into sudden contrast with well-dressed people.

Jack lifted her chin in her usual haughty fashion, assuming a courage she did not feel. "Oh, well, we can't stand here in the road all evening," she argued. "Jim and Mr. Merrit must see that the horses and wagon are put up somewhere, so come on, Olive, let's lead the way. At least we can be grateful that we don't know anyone here and no one knows us."

Elderly ladies raised their lorgnettes to stare at the newcomers and some young people whispered together.

"There they come, mother," a young girl cried excitedly. "I told you we would get here before they did!"

Jack and Olive had just mounted the verandah steps with Carlos, and Ruth and Jean, each holding Frieda's hand, were following close behind, when there was a soft rustle of silk across the piazza and Mrs. Harmon

and her son Donald, whom the caravan party had left safe at Rainbow Lodge, stood before them. A minute later a servant wheeled Elizabeth over in a big chair.

"We just couldn't bear not to see the Yellowstone Park too," Elizabeth explained fervently. "Don and I talked of nothing else after you went away in your wonderful caravan, and at last father said mother could bring us here. It took us only a day to make the trip that has taken you more than two weeks. Aren't you glad to see us?"

Jack kissed Elizabeth hurriedly, while the rest of the party shook hands with Mrs. Harmon and Donald. The girls were too dazed with surprise and fatigue to know whether they were glad or sorry to see the acquaintances to whom they had rented their beloved home. Ruth thought Mrs. Harmon's manner a little constrained when she spoke to them.

"We don't want to haunt you, Miss Drew," she apologized, "but we were so close to this marvelous park it seemed a pity for us to miss it, and Don and Elizabeth are so in love with your ranch girls they believe they will enjoy it twice as much with you here. We came on after Beth had a letter from Miss

Ralston telling her about the time you expected to arrive."

There was one member of the caravan party who had no hesitation in expressing his views of the unexpected appearance of the three members of the Harmon family. Jim was frankly displeased. "It wasn't enough to rent them our Lodge for the summer and have them drive me plumb crazy with questions before I got away," he complained to Ruth as soon as she broke the news to him, "but now we have got to tote 'em over the whole of the Yellowstone. I guess they must think I'm the original Cooks' Tour man," he growled, forgetting his newly acquired English in his bad temper.

But Ruth laughed sympathetically. "Never mind, Mr. Jim," she returned. "I am sorry myself that we can't have our trip to ourselves, but I hope pleasure will somehow come out of the presence of the Harmons here."

So far as Ruth or any member of the Rainbow Ranch family could see for many months to come not good, but great evil grew out of the entrance of these new acquaintances into their lives.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. DRUMMOND AND RALPH CHANGE PLACES

THE ranch girls, Jim and Ralph Mer-
rit were at supper later that even-
ing when some one walked down
the length of the long dining room, glancing
for an instant toward their table as he passed
by.

Frieda nearly choked over her soup.
“Look, Jack, there’s the man who gave me
the pretty yellow stone this afternoon!” she
exclaimed in a loud whisper.

Jack look up quickly and blushed. Then
to hide her confusion, she smiled and bowed
in an unexpectedly friendly fashion, surpris-
ing the others, as she was usually shy with
strangers. Mr. Drummond returned her
greeting cordially, smiling at Frieda; and
straightway the social position of the caravan-
ers reached the high-water mark. He was
said to be a wealthy bachelor from New
York, but as no one actually knew anything
about him and he had refused to associate

with the other guests, his reserve caused him to be regarded as a very important person.

After dinner, as the girls went out on the verandah, they looked as though they had dressed to illustrate the name of the Rainbow Ranch. Weary of their traveling costumes they had put on their best summer muslins. Jack wore a violet organdie, Jean a red one, Olive was in pale yellow and Frieda in blue. Ruth never dressed in anything except white in the evenings. Jim went off to inquire for his mail, asking Ruth to wait for him. He was beginning to feel anxious to hear how things were going on at the ranch in his absence.

Peter Drummond stood a short distance off watching the little group. In coming west, he had made up his mind to have nothing to do with the people he ran across in the course of his travels. He saw too much of society in New York. Wealthy, of an old Knickerbocker family, with a home on the south side of Washington Square, life had given him everything he desired until three short months before. Then, when he was forty years old, for the first time in his life he had fallen in love, and the woman he cared for refused to marry him for what seemed to

Peter a perfectly absurd reason. Therefore Mr. Drummond had determined forever to forswear the company of women. He was wondering if girls need be included in his decision, when Frieda solved the problem for him. Slipping away from the others she crossed the piazza. Peter suddenly discovered a pair of serious blue eyes gazing straight into his.

"If you want that stone back that you gave me this afternoon you may have it," she said. "You see I did cry a little bit when I fell, so perhaps it isn't exactly fair of me to keep it."

Mr. Drummond's face was quite as serious as Frieda's.

"I should hardly like to be called an 'Injun giver', would you?" he asked. "I don't know how girls feel about it, but when I was a boy if another fellow tried to get back a thing he had given away he was thought to be a pretty poor kind of person."

"Girls feel the same way," Frieda felt compelled to answer honestly.

"Then, for my sake, won't you please keep it?—and shaking hands makes it a bargain," Peter returned, extending his hand to clasp Frieda's. With her fingers still in his, he

joined Ruth and the other girls, who had been trying not to laugh at the little scene.

Few eastern people, who have had no experience of life in the West, realize how much more unconventional and informal it is. Strangers meeting on a train talk as freely during the journey as though they had been formally introduced; friendliness is in the very atmosphere.

So, though Mr. Drummond was surprised at his own behavior, the ranch girls accepted his approach quite simply. First, he inquired of Ruth if Freida had really been hurt in her accident of the afternoon; ten minutes later he knew the names of the five girls, something of their history, had heard of Jim Colter and Ralph Merrit, and had given a brief account of himself in exchange, and for the first time in three months was actually enjoying himself.

The moon was just rising behind the dark circle of evergreen forests that bordered the Yellowstone Lake on three sides. Going out on the lawn, Olive was first to discover a dark figure with his hands in his pockets strolling quietly up and down. Perhaps because in the early days, when first brought home to Rainbow Ranch, she too had some-

times felt like an alien, now she was the only one of the caravaners to guess why Ralph had gone away from them wishing to be alone.

Ralph Merrit was having a fight with himself. In the past ten days, as a guest of the caravan party, he had learned to care for them very deeply. If he preferred one of the girls to the others he had not said so nor showed it in any way. During the trip he felt he had been able to make himself useful, but since their arrival at the hotel Ralph had felt shy and ill at ease. Jack had told him they were poor, and in the gay camaraderie of the open air he had thought little of wealth or poverty; now he was acutely conscious of his own lack of money. With hardly a dollar in his pocket and only a change of clothes in his knapsack, he could not remain one of the travelers through the Yellowstone Park. It was hard to say farewell to his friends and to start out again to look for work, but harder to remain and not do his share in the entertainment. The ranch girls evidently had richer friends than he dreamed, the Harmons were evidently wealthy people, and Ralph had been told this Mr. Drummond was a millionaire.

"What's the matter, Ralph?" Jack's friendly voice asked. Olive had drawn her and Jean over in Ralph's direction, while Mr. Drummond, Ruth and Frieda walked slowly on.

"We have been wondering what had become of you ever since dinner?" Jean added.

Ralph cleared his throat a bit huskily.

"I've got a bad case of blues," he said, "but I am glad you found me out. I have got to be off from here early in the morning, and perhaps it is better to explain to you to-night."

Jean pouted, Jack gave a surprised exclamation, Olive believed she understood.

"But I thought you told Jim you would make the trip with us, Ralph," Jack argued. "Has anything disagreeable happened? Surely no one of us has hurt your feelings."

Ralph shook his head emphatically. "No people have ever been so good to me in my life," he answered. "Look here, don't you think the best thing to do is to make a clean breast of things? I am going away because I haven't any money, and I'm not going to be a snide and stay on here as your guest. I told you that the little money I had was stolen from me by the two miners who took

me out to 'Miner's Folly' to see if their claims were any good. It wasn't much, because I came west to earn a fortune, not to spend one, but it was all I had. Now I have to clear out and look for a job. I don't think we are 'Ships That Pass in the Night', I believe we are going to meet again, some day," Ralph ended. "And if ever there is anything I can do to show you my gratitude and appreciation——"

"Oh, do hush, Ralph Merrit!" Jean burst out impetuously. "I don't see what you have got to thank us for. But if you really were having a good time you wouldn't go off and leave us."

"That isn't fair, Jean," Ralph answered hotly. Then he laughed at himself, for Jean's speeches had a fashion of provoking him, although he was so much her elder.

"I don't believe that, Jean," Jack interrupted. "But I don't see why Ralph can't finish the trip with us and then go after his fortune."

"I am so sorry nobody understands," Ralph said slowly, "but I must be off just the same. I'll see you again in the morning, but our real good-by is to-night."

As Olive shook hands she said quietly:

"I understand why you are going. And don't worry, please, because I feel sure I can make the others understand." Jack's good night was cordial, but Jean refused to change her opinion of Ralph's desertion.

Ruth suggested that the girls go back to the hotel for their wraps, as the evening was growing chilly. As Jean and Jack disappeared on their way to their rooms, Mrs. Harmon drew Olive and Frieda to her end of the porch, Mr. Drummond had said good night, Ralph Merrit had again vanished, and still Jim had not returned. Ruth could not make up her mind whether to be angry with Jim for being so long in keeping his appointment with her, or to feel worried for fear something had happened to him.

CHAPTER XV

ELIZABETH'S STRANGE CONFESSION

JEAN stayed upstairs, but when Jack came back with the wraps she found Ruth and Jim gone, leaving word that she and Olive were to put Frieda to bed without waiting for her, as she might come back fairly late.

Over in a quiet corner Jack saw Olive and Frieda still with the Harmons. [In a moment she meant to join them, but first she must conquer a queer sensation that overmastered her. Jack bit her lips and her eyes clouded. Never before in her life had she known what it was to be overtaken by a premonition; now she felt almost ill, she longed to escape and never set eyes on the Harmons again. With all her soul she longed for Rainbow Lodge and wished they had not rented it to strangers.

But Olive had seen Jack, and Donald was crossing over to ask her to join them. Jack closed her eyes, opened them, shrugged her

shoulders and determined to think no more foolishness that evening.

When she reached Elizabeth Harmon's side, the girl caught her hand eagerly and pressed it against her thin, hot cheek. "I have been telling mother I knew none of you were pleased at our coming to the Yellowstone while you were here," she declared pettishly, "and I suppose *I* will be in the way; but please won't you just say *you* are glad to have me? I don't care about the others."

"Elizabeth," Mrs. Harmon remonstrated; but Jack leaned over and gently kissed the spoiled girl who had taken such an overwhelming fancy to her. At the same moment a wave of remorse swept over her that she had not at once been happy at her opportunity to add something to Elizabeth's pleasure. How pitiful it was that the young girl so longed to take part in their outdoor amusements, when she was able to walk only a few yards at a time. Suddenly a feeling of thankfulness for her own health and vigor rushed over Jack, and in that moment she determined, while they were thrown together, to devote herself utterly to her new friend; for Jacqueline Ralston possessed many of the traits of character of a brave boy or man.

Weakness and a need for her protection made an instant appeal to her. It was her first instinct in caring for Olive and it was responsible for what she afterwards did for Elizabeth Harmon.

"I am truly glad you are here with us, Elizabeth," Jack could now reply honestly. "But haven't you enjoyed your two weeks at Rainbow Lodge, and hasn't it done you good? I felt so sure you would soon grow stronger there, perhaps because I love the ranch so dearly myself, and have been so well and happy there."

Elizabeth shrugged her delicate shoulders until her loose mass of red-gold hair almost covered her face. "Oh, yes, I like the ranch well enough and I suppose I am better," she returned. "But I thought father came west and rented your house so I might be out of doors all the time, and go about wherever I wished, and now I am hardly allowed to get out of sight of the Lodge. As soon as you went away such a queer lot of people turned up at your ranch—a gypsy with his wagon and family. They are camping somewhere on your place, because they are always being seen. One day Don and I saw them near the stump of the old tree where you and

Olive made the compact of friendship with us."

Jack opened her lips to speak, and then changed her mind, Olive turned from talking with Donald to stare in amazement, when from the depth of Mrs. Harmon's lap a small voice said sleepily, "I bet you, Jack, Elizabeth is talking about those same gypsies who came to our ranch and told our fortunes. I thought Jim said he would not have them on our place," Frieda ended.

Jack blushed. She too had guessed "Gypsy Joe" must be the intruder, and intended to report the matter to Jim, but she did not wish any discussion of the subject with the Harmons.

"Oh, but gypsies aren't the only queer people who have come to the ranch," Elizabeth continued; "there are other rough looking men whom father spends hours and hours with. He——"

"Elizabeth," Mrs. Harmon interrupted sternly, "how many times have I asked you not to talk of your father's affairs with strangers? He would be extremely angry with you for telling Miss Ralston this nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense, it's the truth and you know it," Elizabeth answered. "I believe

father sent us away from Rainbow Lodge at this time because he wanted to get rid of us. And he promised me he would not attend to any business while we were on the ranch. Now two men are coming on from the East to see him, and he is as worried and excited over something as can be and won't tell us what it is."

Mrs. Harmon lifted Frieda from her lap. "Donald, will you please persuade Elizabeth not to bore Miss Ralston with our family history?" she asked.

"Oh, shut up, Elizabeth. Why do you never do as mother asks you?" Donald muttered, and Elizabeth began to cry like a spoiled baby.

Jack, Olive and Frieda kept their eyes on the ground; not being accustomed to family quarrels they felt exceedingly uncomfortable.

"Suppose we say good night, Donald, dear," Mrs. Harmon suggested. "I am sure Elizabeth must be tired. Miss Ralston, I believe my husband has written your overseer of the presence of this gypsy on your ranch. In regard to Mr. Harmon's present worry and excitement, we have not mentioned it to Elizabeth, as we try to keep our annoyances from her; but her father has recently lost a good

deal of money in Wall Street, so he is naturally concerned."

"I am sure I am awfully sorry," Jack replied, not knowing exactly what she should say. But five minutes later she and Olive and Frieda breathed a sigh of relief—the Harmon family had finally departed to their rooms and the ranch girls were free to go to bed.

Half an hour later Donald Harmon was still in his mother's room. Elizabeth was fast asleep in the room adjoining.

"Is there any way on earth to make Elizabeth stop talking when she shouldn't, Don?" Mrs. Harmon sighed. "Poor child, she is so difficult! I was wretchedly uncomfortable, not knowing what she might tell to-night."

Donald's handsome face clouded. "She don't know anything, so she can't tell anything," he answered. "I almost wish she did; then the responsibility would be off my conscience. And I know father would forgive Beth anything."

Mrs. Harmon changed color. "Well, he wouldn't forgive you or me, son," she replied. "And, after all, this isn't our affair, and we must not interfere with your father's plan."

Don shook his head, unconvinced by his mother's argument. "I don't know whether you are right or wrong in this, mother," he answered. "It seems to me this time we ought to interfere. By keeping silent and not letting the Ralstons know of our suspicion, we are behaving pretty dishonorably." Donald lifted his shoulders and shook them as though he were trying to shake off the burden of the idea that oppressed him. "Perhaps father's great find will come to nothing and he has been deceived about the whole business," he added hopefully. "For my part I wish things would turn out that way. I don't like to be mixed up in this."

Mrs. Harmon looked worn and older. Before no one but her son did she drop her society mask and show her true self. "Dear," she protested, "remember you and I can bear being poor, but think how dreadful life would be for Elizabeth if we did not have a great deal of money to do for her."

Don sighed. Always he had been expected to sacrifice everything for his sister, and now he was to be asked to sacrifice his honor as well. But he wondered why his mother should talk of their being poor because his father had lost a portion of his money in

Wall Street. His mother had a wealthy aunt who had always done everything for them, and he and his sister were supposed to be her only heirs. It wasn't very probable that Aunt Agatha would lose all her fortune or go back on them.

Donald bent to kiss his mother good night. "For goodness' sake, let's don't worry over this scheme of father's until we know it is going to amount to something," he argued. "We do want to have a good time on this trip—the ranch girls are simply great!"

While all this was transpiring, Ruth and Jim Colter were rowing along the northern border of Yellowstone Lake toward a small island known as Pelican Roost. Earlier in the afternoon, on seeing a number of the pelicans floating like a fleet of boats on the face of the water, Ruth had idly suggested that she would like to see them at night, as they must look, roosting on their island, like wicked old ghosts. And Jim had planned then to bring Ruth out for a moonlight row alone.

When he returned to find Ruth waiting on the verandah for him, he had made no explanation of his long absence and, as his face was unusually serious, Ruth had asked no

questions. In the hour of his absence the face of the world had changed for Jim Colter! Before going to the hotel clerk for the letters that had been sent him from the Rainbow Ranch, Jim had made up his mind to tell Ruth he loved her to-night, and to try to make her love him in return. The weeks of the caravan trip had ended a fight with himself. Jim had finally decided that a man's past need have nothing more to do with him than an old garment that has been cast aside forever. He would tell Ruth he cared for her and they would begin a new life together. But this was his idea before reading the letters from the Rainbow Ranch.

Jim now rowed on in complete silence, while Ruth idly wondered when he was going to make up his mind to talk and what special thing he could wish to tell her alone. As Jim always took a long time to put his thoughts into words she felt no impatience.

"I had a letter from that Harmon man," Jim remarked abruptly. It was so different a speech from anything she expected him to say that Ruth felt irritated. Wasn't it rather stupid for Jim to have brought her out alone on the lake in the moonlight to talk of the Harmens?

"Did you?" she returned indifferently, slipping her white fingers in the water to see if she could touch one of the yellow water lilies that floated near.

Jim heaved a sigh so deep that Ruth laughed. "I never did want to rent our Lodge to the fellow," he protested bitterly. "I knew nothing but trouble could come from a New York money grabber."

"Why, Mr. Jim, you are unfair," Ruth declared. "You know you were as anxious, after the first, to come on this caravan trip as the rest of us. And we couldn't have come without the Harmon money. I am sorry you haven't enjoyed it."

"I have liked it better than anything I ever did since I was born, Ruth Drew," Jim replied so solemnly that Ruth was frightened into silence. "But I suppose we might have managed it somehow without introducing the plagued Harmon family onto our ranch. What do you think this Harmon man has written me?"

"I am sure I don't know—what?" Ruth asked a little irritably.

"Oh, nothing but a cool offer to buy Rainbow Ranch off our hands at any reasonable figure we choose to sell it for. He says he

has gotten so interested in the ranch, and thinks it such a fine place for his daughter and son, that he would be willing to pay what our neighbors might think a fancy sum for the place."

For just a half second Ruth's heart stood still, or felt as though it had. She saw Rainbow Ranch, which had been saved for them once by Frieda's discovery, slipping away again, the girls scattered, herself back in the old Vermont village away from this wonderful western life, and Jim—she wondered *what would* become of Jim.

Then Ruth came to her senses. "Well, Mr. Jim, I don't see anything so dreadful in Mr. Harmon's offer. I don't wonder he is in love with our ranch, but we don't have to sell it to him because he wants it, do we? Jack would never think of it."

"It isn't all just what Jack wishes, Miss Ruth," Jim answered sadly. "It is because living on the ranch with you and the girls means more than everything else in the world to me, that it kind of sinks into me that we oughtn't to turn Mr. Harmon's offer down without thinking and talking it over. The ranch don't pay such an awful lot these days—just barely enough to keep things going; and

maybe the girls ought to have advantages like schools and traveling. You know better than I do, Ruth. Won't you try and help me think this thing out and decide what is best for them?"

For a moment Ruth was silent, knowing in her heart why Jim took Mr. Harmon's offer so seriously. All his own hopes and plans depended on his refusing it. If he were no longer the overseer of the Rainbow Ranch he would have nothing to offer the woman he loved, not even a bare support. The money he had saved for himself in the past years would not keep them six months. Therefore, since Jim Colter's sense of honor was stronger than any selfish desire, he feared that his own wish to turn down Mr. Harmon's offer without wasting a moment's consideration on it was simply because it would serve his own purpose and not because it was best for the ranch girls.

"I don't believe it will be best for the girls to sell the ranch, I don't honestly," Ruth replied. And then under her breath, "I promise you I am not thinking of us."

What Ruth meant by her use of the word "us" Jim did not know. Of course she too might lose her occupation if the girls gave

up the ranch. But whatever she meant the word sounded pretty good to him.

"Of course it would do no harm to talk over the proposition from Mr. Harmon with the girls," Ruth added indifferently; "but I am as sure as I ever was of anything in the world just how they will feel about it. Don't let's speak of it now, though, Mr. Jim. Mr. Harmon can't expect you to reply to his letter at once, and we don't want any business to interfere with our first days in wonderland. Was there anything else in Mr. Harmon's letter that annoyed you?"

"Yes—no," Jim answered shortly. "At least Harmon wrote that he had some private business with the fellow who came junketing around in a gypsy cart to our ranch one day, and he presumed I wouldn't mind the man's staying on the place. Can't imagine what Harmon can want of a tramp like 'Gypsy Joe.' He never would have written me about him, I suppose, if he hadn't known the boys at the ranch would tell me as soon as one of them could get up the energy to write." Jim again relapsed into silence. The moon went behind a cloud and the island was hardly visible ahead. Ruth decided that the evening had been a disappointing one. She wondered

why the thought of this half-gypsy, half-gentleman tramp should give Jim the blues. She had relieved his mind of the idea that it was his duty for the girls' sake to sell them out of house and home.

"Let's row back to shore, Mr. Jim," Ruth said coldly, in the aloof manner she still knew how to use when things did not please her. "I am getting tired and sleepy, and I don't want the girls to worry about me."

Jim silently turned his boat to shore. After all, perhaps he had been mistaken in the idea that a man can rid himself of his past. If Ruth knew why this fellow, whom she heard spoken of as "Gypsy Joe," could send the cold shivers up and down his spine, would she ever use the tiny word "us" in the tone that she had spoken it a while before?

When Jim and Ruth said good night, instead of feeling a closer bond of affection, they were colder in their manner toward one another than they had been since the hour the caravan first rolled away from the Rainbow Ranch and the days of their good comradeship began.

CHAPTER XVI

"OLD FAITHFUL"

O Miss Ralston, will you ride horseback with me this morning instead of going over in the coach to see the geysers?" An unfamiliar masculine voice spoke near Jack. She had stolen out of doors early to catch a view of "The Sleeping Giant," one of the natural curiosities of Yellowstone Lake, the perfect outline of a human face turned skyward reflected in one of the pools near the hotel. Jack started and turned to discover Mr. Drummond.

"I brought my own horses to the Yellowstone with me," he continued, "and I am sure you will find riding more agreeable than being bounced around in a rickety coach. I heard your chaperon say last night that you intended to give your own horses and caravan a rest. We can ride near enough the stage for them to look after you."

Jack's eyes sparkled with pleasure, like a child's. "Oh, please, do you really wish me

to ride with you?" she asked, only half convinced. "One of the girls I met at the hotel yesterday told me you had the most wonderful horses. But how did you ever guess how I loved to ride?"

Mr. Drummond laughed. Jack's acceptance of his invitation was as frank as a boy's. She made no pretense of caring for Mr. Drummond's society as she did for the chance to ride.

"It is easy enough to guess you can ride or do anything else that belongs to the outdoors," he returned smiling. "So please don't forget to ask your chaperon right away, so I can give my man the order for our horses."

Jack nodded happily. "Oh, I am sure it will be all right," she answered. "I hope you won't think we are very unconventional, but you see we have always lived on a ranch, and perhaps we don't know all the fine social distinctions, just what's right and what's wrong for a girl to do." She laughed cheerfully. Nothing in the wide world interested Jack less than society, and never could she have become such good friends with Peter if she had met him anywhere else than here in the wilderness. Jack had none of the stirrings of sentiment in her, but although she was a

young girl and Mr. Drummond a man of wide experience she had a genius for friendship, which he was to find out in an amazingly short time.

An hour later a dozen or more people trooped out of the hotel ready for the day's amusement. It had been arranged that the Harmons and the caravan party should drive over to the most reliable geyser in the Yellowstone Park, "Old Faithful," who pours forth his steaming, scalding water every seventy minutes as regularly as clock work. Fortunately for the ranch girls, Ruth had seen that each one of them owned a second traveling costume, for the outfits in which they left Rainbow Ranch were too dilapidated to put on again. Now they appeared in new khaki costumes, looking as fresh and businesslike as the day they first set out on their journey. Only Jack wore a corduroy riding habit.

Olive and Jack gazed with open admiration at Mrs. Harmon, never having seen a woman so beautifully gowned before. Somehow in her soft, hunter's green broadcloth and close-fitting hat she did suggest Olive—Jack thought, perhaps because she wore Olive's favorite shade of green.

Ralph Merrit had waited to say a final

good-by to the caravan party just before the stage rolled away. He had walked over with Jack to where Mr. Drummond and his groom waited with the horses; then he came back, kissed Frieda and shook hands with Olive, Ruth and Jim. Jean was looking everywhere but in his direction.

She held a small book in her hand, and Ruth looked at it curiously. Jean was fond of reading, but she would hardly select the day they were to visit the most famous geyser in the world to pursue her literary tastes. Sticking forth from the pages, quite by accident Ruth saw a spray of pale blue forget-me-nots; they grew everywhere about the park.

"You'll be sure to come to Rainbow Lodge to see us some day, won't you?" Ruth urged cordially. Jim gave Ralph's hand another shake. "We'll count on you," he urged. "You know I told you I never liked a fellow half so well in so short a time."

"Won't you say good-by, Jean, and take back what you said last night?" Ralph asked, half serious and half smiling.

Jean thrust out a book. "I suppose I must," she answered, "as I hate to be cross with people when they are so far away there is no chance to quarrel. I have put a spray

of forget-me-nots in this book, so you won't forget us," she ended prettily.

Just before the coach moved off Jack, mounted on a thoroughbred horse, rode up to show herself to her friends with Mr. Drummond following behind her.

In the best seat in the stage, with sofa cushions piled about her, sat Elizabeth Harmon. As she saw Jack an ill-humored expression crossed her face. "I thought we were going to have the drive together. You promised only last night that you would try to make me have a good time, and now first thing next morning you are going off and leaving me," she exclaimed.

Jack turned crimson. She had meant to be good to Elizabeth, but it had never occurred to her to give up her horseback ride on her account.

"I am sorry, Elizabeth," she answered uncomfortably. "Perhaps Mr. Drummond would exchange me for Jean or Olive. I didn't know you cared so much about my driving with you."

Jean and Olive both shook their heads decidedly, and Frieda gazed at Elizabeth in stern disapproval; but Mr. Drummond, who was also accustomed to having his own way,

settled the matter. "*You'll* take the ride with me this morning, Miss Ralston," he announced, "then you can devote yourself to your friend later in the day if you like." And Elizabeth was obliged to be content.

Jack was convinced she had never had such a wonderful ride in her life, never had she felt in such glorious health and spirits. Her horse moved along under her with a gait to which she was entirely unaccustomed. Only shaggy bronchos and rough western ponies had been her mounts until to-day, and now she was on the back of a beautiful Kentucky thoroughbred, riding over a perfect road, very different from the long stretches of sand on the plains. The two riders had galloped on for several miles without a word, Peter keeping a little in the background to enjoy the wonderful grace and ease of Jack's horsemanship.

Suddenly the girl reined in her horse and the man slowed down. "I want to thank you for this glorious ride now while I have the chance," she said simply. "Sometimes I wish I could spend my whole life in the saddle, I love it so. I hope I wasn't selfish in not driving with Elizabeth Harmon. I am so horribly sorry for people who can't ride

and walk and swim and enjoy the things I do, I would do nearly anything in the world for them," she ended wistfully. And for a long time afterward Mr. Drummond remembered what Jack had said and her beauty and careless vigor as she spoke, with her hands holding her mare's reins lightly but firmly and her body keeping perfect rhythm with its every movement.

The two riders came to the neighborhood of the great geyser a little in advance of the coaching party. They rode up to within a reasonable distance of the queer, symmetrical, cone-shaped hill. There were a few people waiting about, but the place was quite peaceful and showed no sign of the leaping torrent of water Jack anticipated. She was intending to dismount from her horse when the stage arrived. Suddenly a roar, like a giant's snort, came from beneath the earth and almost instantly steaming water began to rise through the mouth of the cone in glistening, gleaming bubbles, then a giant cataract reared itself. Jack and Peter Drummond had been too surprised at the geyser's sudden display of its powers to get off their horses at once, and Jack's thoroughbred was not trained to endure any such exhibition of

the unknown forces of nature. Her whole body quivered as though she had been struck a cruel blow, then, making a leap straight into the air and coming down on her two hind feet, she began to dance and curvet and leap about as though bewitched. Mr. Drummond had a horrified moment of fearing Jack would be dreadfully injured, but he was too engaged in quieting his own horse's terror to give her aid. The coaching party arrived on the scene at this minute and they were torn between interest in the marvelous geyser and concern for Jack's safety.

Jack proved her horsemanship by recognizing that the high-strung animal she was riding required a different treatment from one of her rough ponies. Never once did she use her whip on the pretty mare, but talked to her in a gentle, soothing tone, keeping her nose turned directly toward the roaring stream of water, so that the mare should not bolt and run on hearing extraordinary noises at her back.

In four or five minutes two hundred and fifty thousand gallons of scalding water had been raised one hundred and fifty feet in the air, held for a little time and then dashed down to earth again, and "Old Faithful" was

once more peaceful for exactly an hour and ten minutes.

But in this period Jacqueline had brought her horse to a quivering standstill not far from the geyser. Elizabeth Harmon was pale with fright and her eyes were full of tears of apprehension, but Frieda was merely interested in her sister's performance, as she had not the least idea of her being hurt.

In a few seconds after the excitement had passed, Jim Colter leapt out of the stage and walked toward Jack. "Bravo!" he said, as she slid off her mare, handing her reins to Mr. Drummond.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he continued stiffly—Mr. Drummond's citified elegance had irritated him—"I couldn't help feeling some pride in Miss Ralston's cool head. When it comes to a question of nerve, Jack, you certainly have got the right stuff in you," he concluded. And Jack blushed happily, because Jim's praises were rare, not caring half so much that her new friend was even more impressed by her courage than her old one.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LANGUAGE OF THE FLOWERS

ALL that was possible of geyserland was seen by the ranch girls and their friends during the long day: geysers alive and dead, spouting and silent, great and small, and all the magic, shining pools in the neighborhood, until there seemed no words left for wonderment and no strength for further admiration. The coaching party had brought with them the clothes and supplies they would need for several days and nights, as they meant to make the tour of the Park before returning to their starting place, spending the nights in the various hotels along their route.

Mr. Drummond had intended to return to the Lake the same evening, but this was before he spent a picnic day with the ranch girls. After a hurried consultation with Jim he decided to go on with the travelers.

It was late in the afternoon of the first day, when Mrs. Harmon and Ruth found a

bit of wild woodland and declared they must rest and not see another sight. They were in walking distance of the hotel where they were to spend the night, and Jim and Mr. Drummond went ahead with the horses and coach to see what arrangements had been made for their comfort.

The two older women were getting out the tea basket and lighting their alcohol lamp, when Jean and Donald insisted on trying to boil the water at one of the hot springs in the neighborhood. Olive, Frieda and Carlos followed them, Frieda anxious to avert a tragedy. Having read in her guidebook that a small dog, leaping into the pool for a stick, had been boiled and sizzled to death, she was determined that no one of them should meet the same fate.

As Elizabeth was tired, Jack stayed behind with her, letting the sick girl rest her head in her lap while they talked of the day's experiences.

Suddenly Elizabeth sat up. "Let me do your hair for you, Jack," she begged. "I want to see it over your shoulders. I know it is prettier than mine; and for once I won't be jealous." Instead of two long braids Jack, in honor of her ride with Mr. Drum-

mond, had twisted her hair into a coronet. Slowly Elizabeth began to unwind it.

"Of course my hair isn't prettier than yours," Jack protested. "It is not so lovely and shiny. Nobody thinks it is even half so nice as Frieda's or Jean's or Olive's, and I don't care a bit, neither do you, you goose."

Elizabeth sighed. "Yes, I do, Jack," she confessed honestly. "You don't care because you have so much, but I have so little I am awfully jealous and envious."

Jack's frank face clouded. She did not know exactly what to say to so queer a girl as Elizabeth Harmon. The ranch girls never preached, and Jack was not inclined to be critical, always preferring action to speech, so that now she found herself in deep water.

"Look here, Elizabeth," she said a moment later, with a wisdom greater than she dreamed, "I believe you make yourself sicker by thinking so much about your illness and worrying about the things you *can't* do. I know it is awfully hard, but if you'll promise me while you are out west to try every day to see if you can walk a little farther and eat more and not be cross, why, I'll do most anything in the world for you."

"Will you come and stay with me at Rain-

bow Lodge and let the others go on with their holiday?" Elizabeth begged.

Jack laughed and shook her head. "I couldn't do that, dear. I should feel too queer and homesick to be visiting in my own home."

"Then you'll come to New York next winter to stay with me?" Elizabeth demanded.

"That will be best of all. It seems so funny to me that you've never been in a theater or to a big restaurant or to any large city!"

"I'd love to come, Elizabeth," Jack agreed, "but you mustn't expect me, for you know we ranch girls haven't any money except just enough to live on, and I couldn't possibly take more than my share for such a trip."

Elizabeth pouted. "You don't know what it means not to be rich, Elizabeth," Jack explained. "Here come the others, thank goodness! I am nearly starved."

When Frieda, Carlos and Olive appeared, their hands were filled with every variety of lovely wild flower. They had been searching the woods and hills for them, while Jean and Donald hung over the boiling pool with their kettle swung in the water by a long string. Olive and the two children flung their flowers in a heap in Ruth's lap. "Give us a botany lesson on the Park flowers when

tea is over, Ruth," Olive suggested. "I wish I knew as much about them as you do."

It was a beautiful afternoon, warm even for July in this part of the country, although the whole month had been such a mild one that the peaks of the snow-capped Yellowstone mountains were less white than usual, from the melting of the snow. Nobody seemed inclined to stir when tea was over. Ruth was idly twining a wreath of the wild flowers, when Jean flung herself down by her.

"Don't give us a real botany lesson, Ruth," Jean exclaimed. "I have thought of a much prettier idea. Suppose you tell us our characters in flowers. Give each one of us a special posy and then tell us the names and habits of the flower, and say why you think we are like them."

Ruth laughed. "That's a small order, Miss Bruce," she answered; "but if Mrs. Harmon dosen't mind our foolish ways of having a good time together, I'll do my best."

Elizabeth sat up and a faint sparkle came into her eyes and a color in her face. "I should dearly love to hear our flower natures," Mrs. Harmon returned, as eager and interested as any one of the company.

Ruth surveyed her bouquet critically.

From the center of the tangled mass in her lap she carefully selected a thick cluster of deep blue forget-me-nots, and with a perfectly serious face leaned over and stuck them into Jean's brown hair.

"Here, Jean, suppose we begin with you," she suggested. "I believe a forget-me-not is your flower."

Jean blushed a soft rose color that no one saw except Ruth. "I don't see why you select a forget-me-not for my flower, Ruth, dear," Jean remarked innocently. "I haven't forget-me-not eyes, like Elizabeth and Frieda, and I'm not a wonderful, unforgettable person, like Olive or Jack."

"Never mind, Jean, I have my own reasons for the choice," Ruth returned, and Jean suddenly flung her arms around Frieda and drew her to her lap, so that no one should see her face.

"Olive, dear, you are an evening primrose," Ruth declared, smiling at her own fancy. "I have an idea that part of the time you close up your real feelings inside you, just as this flower hides its blossoms in the daytime. It's almost sunset now and time for it to show its delicate, pink petals. Don't let yourself grow too reserved, dear. Jack has your con-

fidence now, but some day it may be best for the rest of us to know your real dreams and desires." Ruth handed a spray of the blossoms to Olive, with a smile as an apology for her little sermon, though it was well meant and timely.

"Can't you find a flower for me?" Beth asked wistfully, her thin face looking whiter than usual from her fatigue and in contrast with the brilliant, glowing health of the ranch girls.

Ruth looked at the spoiled girl tenderly. Like Jack, she had taken more of a fancy to her than to any member of the Harmon family.

"Here is a flower for you, Beth?" she returned gently. "I hope you will like it. See, it's pure white and like velvet, and though it looks fragile and delicate it keeps its beauty longer than any of the other flowers. Out here in the West they call it an 'immortelle.' It is a prettier name than our eastern title of 'everlasting.'"

Elizabeth's eyes swam with tears of pleasure, and Jack, reaching over, found the white buds in Ruth's lap and made them into a crown for her friend's flowing gold hair, until in the soft light the pale girl looked like a

mythical princess in an old Scandinavian legend.

Frieda's eyes were big and wistful and her lips trembled slightly, for she was not accustomed to being overlooked while a strange girl was made much of by her own sister; indeed both Olive and Frieda had to stifle many pangs of jealousy at Jack's interest in Elizabeth Harmon.

But fortunately Ruth caught Frieda's expression. "Dear me, baby, I haven't forgotten you," she announced. "Won't you be a bitter-root blossom? The flower hasn't a pretty name, but you remember it was the first you gathered when we entered the park yesterday, and the reason I select it for you is because the old gypsy fortune teller said you were sweet and good enough to eat, and this flower is used for food by the Indians, isn't it, Carlos?"

Frieda now smiled placidly, not understanding Ruth's meaning nor any of the other nonsense they were talking, but just the same not wishing to be ignored.

"Now we all have our flowers except Jack," Olive remarked fondly.

"Oh, Ruth hasn't a flower for me. She has exhausted the whole collection," Jack an-

swered. "It is just as well, for I am the most prosaic and unflowerlike character in the entire assembly."

"I don't believe that, Miss Ralston," Mrs. Harmon exclaimed, breaking unexpectedly into the conversation. "You are not like the other girls—I never saw girls so unlike as you ranch girls. I suppose you mean that you are more matter-of-fact and have less sentiment than they have, but you would do anything for a person you loved and you would never turn back from what you thought to be right. You'd face danger, like—well, like we ought all to face it," she ended seriously.

Olive kissed her hand to Jack. "She has done *all that* for me," she murmured, but Jack shook her head, not wishing the Harmones to know anything of Olive's past, and no questions were asked.

"Oh, no, I haven't forgotten Jack. I have purposely saved the columbine for her," Ruth replied. "I must agree with Mrs. Harmon, for it is an aspiring flower and grows taller than any of the other wild flowers. And I am sure it has deep, ardent impulses; for see all its beautiful colors from pure white to rich purple!"

Jack blushed uncomfortably. "Hear, hear!" Jean exclaimed half in fun and half in earnest. "For goodness' sake, don't shower any more compliments on Jacqueline Ralston or we won't be able to live with her. I don't see why you find so many marvelous virtues in her. Consider what an angel I am, and yet nobody is devoting her time to mentioning my noble qualities."

Jack extracted a sofa cushion from Elizabeth's pile, flinging it with accurate aim straight at her cousin's head. Jean returned it with interest and then the girls chased one another around the trees until they were out of breath.

A little later Mr. Drummond and Jim Colter were seen walking toward them, summoning them to the hotel. The entire company gathered up their belongings, and Donald carried his sister to a rolling chair which they had brought along in the stage.

Jean lingered a little in the background, putting her arm about Ruth's waist to draw her away from the others.

"Ruth, dear," she said, with a far-away expression in her eyes, "you've a tiny flower in your buttonhole which has been there all day. I wonder if Jim gave it to you?"

Ruth nodded. "Why do you ask?" she inquired.

"Oh, for no particular reason," Jean answered, "only I happen to know that Jim got up soon after daylight this morning, and climbed for miles and miles up a steep hill. Why don't you choose that flower, Ruth, as appropriate to your character?" Jean proposed, and her expression was so innocent that Ruth began to guess at her meaning.

"The flower is called Indian Paint Brush," Jean continued; "but the name has nothing to do with you. It is only that it grows on the peaks of high, cold mountains and one has to climb and climb and struggle and struggle to reach it. Poor old Jim!"

Ruth made no reply to her saucy companion, but hurried on to join the rest of the party.

CHAPTER XVIII

“GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN”

IT was Frieda who first found words to speak.

After several days more of travel and sight-seeing, the caravaners and their friends stood on a rocky balcony gazing at the Great Falls of the Yellowstone as they dashed over rocks streaked with red, orange, purple and gold into the gorge below.

“It is the end of the rainbow, I know it is, Mr. Peter Drummond,” Frieda remarked confidentially to her companion who had tight hold of her hand so she should not go too close to the steep embankment. “Jean and Jack have often told me wonderful stories of finding a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Now I know better, for this is really the place where the rainbow touched the earth and all her beautiful colors spilled out and ran into these rocks.”

Jack, who overheard her sister's speech, dropped down on one knee and respectfully

kissed her hand. "Never did I dream until this minute that you were a poet, Frieda Ralston," she exclaimed. "That is a perfectly lovely idea of yours about the rainbow, but you must not let Mr. Drummond think the rainbow ends anywhere except on our ranch, else why should we call it the Rainbow? He has promised to come some day to see for himself."

It was early morning, the sun had just risen and the dawn colors were now slowly fading out of the sky. The tourists had arrived at the hotel near the Canyon late the afternoon before, and had gone to bed as soon as possible so as to see the latest marvel by daylight. To-day was to end their sight-seeing expedition through the Yellowstone Park. Next morning they were to take the train back to their starting place at the Lake; from there the Harmons were to leave for Rainbow Ranch, Mr. Drummond to continue his trip west and Jim to escort Ruth and the ranch girls to a little village in the mountains near the Park, where they were to spend the rest of the summer. Then he intended to make his way home to the ranch and get back to work as quickly as possible.

In the course of their travels, Jim had found

time to tell the girls of Mr. Harmon's proposal to buy their ranch, but they had laughed the suggestion to scorn and he had written Mr. Harmon that they would not consider selling. Also Jim had explained the matter more fully to Mrs. Harmon, asking her to make things clear to her husband on her return to the Lodge—Rainbow Ranch was not in the market.

"Peter is coming to the ranch on his way back to New York, perhaps," Frieda said. In the last few days she had grown to be almost as intimate with Mr. Drummond as her sister, and had also been allowed to ride his wonderful horse. Jean and Olive had enjoyed their turns, but Jack had received the lion's share of attention from their new acquaintance. Once or twice Mr. Drummond had been almost persuaded to tell her of the girl in the East whom he intended to forget.

"Misses Frieda and Jacqueline Ralston," Mr. Drummond said five minutes later, "I am persuaded that these mighty Falls and this giant Canyon may remain in the landscape for some years to come, but *I* shall not live much longer unless we go back to our hotel for breakfast. I have noticed our party,

and they are pale and silent from exhaustion. Never did I approve of before-breakfast excursions. Let us make a start for the hotel and see if they don't follow suit."

The entire company was standing in little groups at some distance apart. Elizabeth had been taking Jack's advice and walking more in the last few days than she had dreamed possible; now she was leaning on Donald's arm, having come all the way from the hotel on foot. Jack, Frieda and Mr. Drummond turned to go down the hill, when Elizabeth caught sight of them. She was worn and tired, for her walk had been too much for her, irritable on account of her fatigue and in a general bad humor with everybody.

"I say, Jack, where are you going?" Elizabeth called out suspiciously in a high, clear voice. "You are always going off somewhere with Mr. Drummond. It is quite impossible to keep up with you."

Jack and her companions stopped stock still, Ruth and Jim looked around in surprise, Mrs. Harmon blushed, and some strangers from the hotel laughed impertinently. Jack's temper got the best of her. Her heart pounded and the pupils of her eyelids

darkened until they were almost black; her mouth was opened to speak.

"Steady, Miss Jack," Peter Drummond whispered quickly. "Remember, Elizabeth is ill and so tired she does not know what she is saying."

"We are going to the hotel to breakfast, Beth," Jack answered quietly, instead of the speech she had intended to make. "Don't you want to come with us? Let me help you." Jack turned back toward her friend and found her eyes filled with tears of regret. Breaking away from Donald, Elizabeth grasped Jack's arm, but was hardly able to stand, even with her assistance.

"Elizabeth isn't able to walk back to the hotel, Donald," Mrs. Harmon said at this moment. "Won't you go ahead and bring back her chair? And I will wait here with her, so no one else must stay on our account."

Elizabeth shook her head, setting her white lips obstinately. "I can walk perfectly well," she insisted. "Jack says it is much better for me to make the effort." Mrs. Harmon looked reproachfully at Jack, and the young girl blushed uncomfortably over having the responsibility thrust upon her.

"I only meant for Beth to walk a little

at a time. I didn't mean for her to overdo herself," she tried to explain.

By this time Olive and Donald had gone on ahead. Ruth and Jim, with Carlos between them, had turned toward the hotel, the strangers had departed, and Mr. Drummond and Frieda were waiting, not too patiently, a little distance off.

Mrs. Harmon took her daughter's other arm and the three women started onward, but it was soon plain, even to Elizabeth, that she could not go on. With a petulant sigh she dropped on the ground. "Go and leave me, please, everybody," she insisted. "I sha'n't mind waiting alone, and I don't care for any breakfast."

Mrs. Harmon signaled to Jack. "Run along, dear, and ask Don to hurry," she murmured quietly, but Elizabeth reached up and caught hold of Jack's skirt. "If anybody's to stay with me, let it be you, Jack," she pleaded. "I have something I want so much to say to you alone. It's most important, and you'll be awfully sorry if you don't listen."

"What can you have to say to Miss Ralston, Elizabeth?" Mrs. Harmon inquired nervously.

"Oh, it is a secret between father and me,"

Beth returned mysteriously. "He wants me to ask Jack something and not to let anyone else know just yet. I had a long telegram from him last night, and now is a good time to ask it."

Reluctantly Jacqueline sat down near Beth, for she did not wish to hear a secret at this hour of the morning, and she did feel faint and hungry for her breakfast. Mrs. Harmon moved off, taking Mr. Drummond and Frieda along with her. The Honorable Peter did not look any too pleased at what he considered the sacrifice of Jack.

As soon as they were out of hearing, Beth flung her arms about her friend. "I am so sorry I said that about you and Mr. Drummond, Jack, dear," she apologized. "I didn't mean a thing by it, and mother says it may be very useful to you ranch girls some day to have such a friend as Mr. Drummond; he may be able to do a lot for you."

"All right, Beth," Jack answered, not as affectionately as usual. "But don't talk about Mr. Drummond's being *useful* to us. I should hate to have a friend for any such horrid reason."

Beth's delicate arm clung to Jack with such pathetic appeal that she was soon soft-

ened. "What was it you wanted to tell me?" she asked a second later.

"I want you to do the most wonderful and beautiful thing for me, Jack," Elizabeth answered passionately, "and what you do will prove whether you are a friend of mine and want me near you, or whether you have been deceiving me all this time. You know you promised me you would do anything I wished on this trip, if I would walk more and try not to be cross, and I have tried to do as you said. Promise me, promise me, you will grant my request, won't you? It will make me so happy!" Elizabeth's cheeks burned with the strength of her desire.

"What in the world are you talking about?" Jack queried, feeling her heart beat uncomfortably.

"Well, father wishes me to persuade you to sell him part of your ranch," Elizabeth explained eagerly. "You see I wrote him that I never had a real girl friend in my life until now, but I believed you cared for me. He says if you do, you will let him have some of your land, so that he can build a little house for me. He wants just a special part of the ranch; I don't understand just what part, but I know it would not make

any difference to you, for it is somewhere in the neighborhood of your creek. Then father wrote that if you would do this for me, I could invite you to visit me in New York next winter and he would pay all your expenses. Oh, wouldn't it be too heavenly!" Elizabeth had taken her arms from about Jack's neck and was clasping her hands together until the veins showed through her white skin. But Jack was as white as her companion, for she knew how difficult it would be to refuse Elizabeth's request and not bitterly wound her feelings, yet the answer must be made.

"I am so sorry, dear," Jack replied, "but I can't sell your father any part of our ranch. The ranch does not belong to me alone and, as I am not of age, Jim Colter is our guardian; and he would never consent to our giving up a part of our place. Don't you see, we need it all to raise our cattle, and the creek is particularly valuable. I can't understand why your father is so anxious to buy the Rainbow Ranch. He has written to Jim and made him an offer for the whole place, yet he can buy other land near us without any trouble, for Wyoming is rich in land." Jack was talking as fast as possible, trying not to

see the storm of tears pouring down Elizabeth's cheeks.

"Then you positively *won't* sell the land, Jack?" Elizabeth interrupted. "I might have known you didn't really care for me and wouldn't wish me to live near you for even a part of the year," she protested bitterly. "And please don't preach any more, for I can see very plainly now that you are not the kind of a girl who can be relied on to keep her word. I would rather you would not stay here with me. I can manage in some way to get down the hill. I certainly shall not let you touch me."

The two girls were seated near the edge of a rocky embankment which dropped down into terraced ledges of stone twenty, then thirty, then forty feet below. On the other side, toward the right, the hill sloped far more gradually and a road had been cut leading to the hotel.

Elizabeth was so angry that she got on her feet before Jack fully realized what she was doing. Then, as Jack made a detaining clutch at her, she lurched away toward the left near the jagged precipice. All about the neighborhood of the Falls, where the ground was uncertain, signs were set up bearing the

word "dangerous." Jack saw in a moment of horror that Elizabeth was tottering toward one of these places. Whether she screamed or not she did not know. But Elizabeth was crying and could not see the sign, and if she heard, she was not strong enough to stop her course instantly. As Jack ran toward her the loose earth crumbled beneath Elizabeth's feet and she slid half over the precipice. But since self-preservation is strong in all of us, she caught with desperate hands at some low shrubs above her head and hung with only half her body over the cliff. "Jack!" she called just once, and was silent, putting all her strength in her clinging hands.

It is said that the drowning have a vision of all that has happened in their past, as the water closes over them for the last time, but Jacqueline Ralston had a vision of all the peril ahead of her as she saw her friend's danger, and realized what she must do to try to save her. Also she knew in this moment that this was her supreme chance to prove she would do anything in her power for a friend.

Jack understood that she could not walk out on the ledge of loose earth, which had

already failed to support Elizabeth's light weight, and so pull the girl back to safety. By some method she must reach up to her from below. Down on her hands and knees, testing cautiously every foot of the way, Jack crawled on until she found a side of the cliff that she was able to climb down. Then, almost like a cat, she crept along, her feet on incredibly small protuberances in the rocks and her hands clutching at anything she could find for support. Finally she reached a small platform in the rocks not more than a foot square, but directly below Elizabeth and within reach of her.

"Be quiet, Beth, and as I push, pull upward with all your might," was all she trusted herself to say, and Elizabeth was beyond answering.

Now Jacqueline Ralston was to prove how a lifetime spent out of doors may give one a cool head, a gallant courage and muscles of steel. Taking firm hold of Elizabeth just below the girl's knees, she pushed her up, up, inch by inch; Elizabeth stretching out one hand at a time to grasp the shrubs growing in the more solid ground. At last, with Jack's strong hands below her feet and one more shove, Elizabeth dragged herself out of

danger and lay half fainting on the solid earth.

Then came Jack's peril. All this time while every thought and effort were directed toward her friend's rescue, she had not looked down at the wicked precipice beneath the narrow ledge of rock where she held her footing. But the instant she let go of Elizabeth's body and lost the slight support it had given her, she also lost the steadying influence that she must fight to save another weaker than herself, and glanced downward. Then whether she grew dizzy and lost her balance or whether she slipped back in an effort to climb, it was impossible to know, but backward she fell past a straight cliff, landing in a crumpled mass on a ledge of the rainbow colored stones twenty feet below. There was no movement and no sound, not even a noise when her body struck.

"Jack!" Elizabeth called faintly a moment later, "Jack!" But no one answered, and the silence was more awful than any sound. Only a great golden eagle swooped over the open gorge as though trying to fathom the tragedy beneath.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SUSPENSE AND WHAT HAPPENED AFTERWARDS

PETER DRUMMOND, returning for the two girls with Donald, found Jack. Elizabeth, who had not dared stir, could only point dumbly to the overhanging abyss, without voice to express her terror.

Donald got his sister back to their hotel, and upstairs in the room with her mother, without any member of the caravan party knowing of their return.

In an incredibly short space of time men came with rope ladders to where Peter watched and waited, and one of them brought Jack's body up, putting it gently down on the grass. Some one else explained that a famous doctor who was a guest at the hotel would be with them in a few minutes.

So Mr. Drummond, alone of all her friends, knelt with the strange men trying to find a spark of life in the unconscious form and still, cold face of the girl who had been the

embodiment of grace and vitality less than a half hour before.

Jim, Ruth, the three other girls and Carlos were having their breakfast in the dining room, when the head waiter came and told Jim that Mr. Drummond wished to speak to him for a moment alone on business.

No one was in the least uneasy about Jack's failure to return. As it was natural to suppose it would take some time to see Elizabeth escorted home in safety, they had decided not to wait for her. Besides, no one ever thought that anything could happen to Jack; she seemed one of the persons in the world best fitted to care for herself and to help look after other people. Here was the old story once more repeating itself: when the beloved one was in grave danger, as Jack was during the night of her enforced stay in the wilderness, on the trip to Miner's Folly, she had turned up serene and unhurt; now when trouble was the farthest thing from their imagination, she was being brought back to them and no one knew whether she were alive or dead.

One sight of Peter's haggard face told Jim that something had happened, but he supposed Elizabeth Harmon to be the victim.

Peter was wise enough not to delay in letting him know the truth. There is no easy way to break bad news, for the shock must always come in the end, so it is best to make the suspense as short as possible. Besides, Mr. Drummond knew that the physician was even now having Jack carried home to the hotel and the little procession might arrive at any moment.

The girls had thought nothing of Jim's disappearance, from the table, but Ruth had not liked the expression on the face of the man who called him away. Suddenly she was seized with a premonition of disaster. Excusing herself, with the explanation that she wanted something in her room, she slipped out after Jim so quietly that neither he nor Mr. Drummond saw or heard her approach until Peter's story was told. And then it was not Ruth, but Jim Colter who broke down. The big, strong man staggered, and such a queer sound came from between his white lips that Ruth laid a shaking hand on him and Mr. Drummond caught him by the arm.

"Remember the girls, Jim," Ruth said almost sternly. "This is the time to think of *them*, not of our own feelings. Mr. Drum-

mond, I must go back to them first. Will you see that everything is——”

Ruth could not go on, but Peter understood. He was to see that all necessary arrangements were made to receive the doctor, who was still to find out if there was any chance of restoring Jack to consciousness.

By the time Ruth returned to the dining room the news of the accident had somehow spread among most of the guests at breakfast. Only the ranch girls were entirely unconscious. Jean was teasing Frieda and Olive was laughing at them, when Ruth put her hand on Jean's shoulder. “Come out of the room with me as quickly and quietly as possible,” she whispered.

“It's Jack, isn't it?” Olive asked with the calmness that so often comes in the first moment of sorrow, and Ruth silently bowed her head.

For an hour Ruth and the girls waited in their room. Ruth and Olive had asked to see Jack, but were not allowed to stay with her. Now and then Mr. Drummond, or Donald Harmon, or Jim would come in to them for a few moments, but would soon slip out again promising to return when there was news. Jean and Frieda cried in each

other's arms until they were blind and sick, but neither Olive nor Ruth shed a tear, so differently do people bear trouble. It seemed that half a lifetime must have passed when the door was suddenly flung open and Jim Colter walked into the room and dropped into a chair. The big, weather-beaten man was crying like a child and shaking as though he were in a chill. Frieda ran to him and climbed into his lap, putting her arms about his neck and burying her face on his shoulder. Olive and Jean opened their mouths to speak, but no words came from their dry lips. The hope that had been sustaining them vanished at the sight of Jim's broken appearance. Only Ruth understood.

"Tell us at once, Jim. It isn't fair to make us wait," she said quietly, guessing that his tears were the tears of relief. "She will live?"

Jim nodded. "Jack opened her eyes a minute ago and said, 'Hello, Jim,'" he answered brokenly. "The doctor says she is pretty badly hurt, but she will pull through."

Then Ruth, hardly knowing what she was doing, leaned over and kissed Jim on his forehead under the line of his black hair, and above the level of his deeply blue Irish

eyes. Quite unexpectedly she and Olive now began to cry for the first time, while Jean and Frieda and Jim were radiant with relief.

Ten days later the family from the Rainbow Ranch, accompanied by Mr. Drummond, left the Yellowstone Park for a small town on its borders.

Jack was able to be moved, and they had rented a little furnished house on the outskirts of the near-by village, hoping that the quiet and change of scenery might benefit her. She had broken her leg by her fall over the precipice, but something else more serious appeared to be the matter with her, something that the doctor did not exactly understand. She had not been able to sit up since the accident.

A week before the ranch party left the hotel, the Harmons went back to the Lodge. When Don and his mother found they could be of no service, it was thought best to take Elizabeth away, for she had never ceased to insist that the tragedy was her fault and to demand to see Jack; and this was impossible. But Mr. Drummond had stayed on and on. Even after he had seen Jack safely moved he seemed unwilling to leave. The little house was so tiny that there was only room

for them and on the front porch for one cot and one chair, but he lived at a hotel and came each day to talk to the invalid and to take the other girls for long walks. Peter had a long, confidential talk with Ruth and Jim, and made them promise that unless Jack grew better after the summer's rest they would bring her on to New York in the fall to consult with famous specialists. He did not dream that they would have to sell a part of the ranch to manage it; but this was what they had quietly made up their minds to do, although Jack was not to be told, for fear of upsetting her, and Jim did not mean to close the bargain with Mr. Harmon until he was able to get back to the ranch.

The tiny house had been a haven of refuge for two weeks when Peter Drummond found that he was obliged to leave. He had persuaded the girls and Ruth to go for a last walk with him, leaving Jim as Jack's guardian. She was asleep on the porch when they slipped out the back door so quietly she had not awakened.

You would hardly have known Jack, so great a change had the last few weeks wrought in her. She had suffered a great deal and the radiant color had gone from her face, leaving

it white and drawn; her full, crimson lips were pale and drooping now; her dark, level eyebrows looked like thin lines of black penciling and her lashes made a shadow against the pallor of her cheeks. Only her hair, the color of burnished copper, shone with its old beauty. It was Olive's special care, and now hung in the two familiar braids almost reaching to the porch floor.

Jack had been awake for some time before Jim realized it. She had been very quiet during her illness, and to the relief of them all had asked no questions about herself, apparently taking it for granted that she was not to be allowed to sit up and could only be moved lying down. Jack's leg was in a plaster cast and her friends believed she regarded this as a sufficient reason for being kept perfectly quiet. Yet all the time she knew that had her leg been the only trouble she would have been allowed to get about on crutches and to sit up to eat her meals, instead of being eternally propped on pillows when she tried to stir.

Jack had asked no questions, because she did not wish to give anyone the pain of telling her the truth until she was strong enough to bear it. But there had not been a waking

hour in the day or night when the vision of Elizabeth Harmon's misfortune had not been present before her mind, and the idea that she might have a greater sorrow to face. Frank Kent had telegraphed to ask if he might come to his friends, but Jack had asked that he wait; she could not bear to see even him just yet.

Jim Colter's eyes were fixed on Jack as sadly and tenderly as her father's could have been, had he been alive, when unexpectedly she lifted her lashes and her gray eyes met her friends with their old brave spirit. She stared a long time with her lips twitching before she spoke.

"What is it, boss? You've got something on your mind that you want to speak about, haven't you?" Jim inquired gently. "The girls think it's a good sign you don't ask questions, but I'm not so sure. You are like some men. Dear, I know you. You can take your medicine when you have to, but you can't be left in the dark. Ask Jim anything you like, and I promise I'll tell you the truth."

"Are we by ourselves?" Jack asked huskily, and Jim nodded. "Then will you tell me please if I am ever going to be able to walk

again?" she queried without hesitating or faltering, keeping her clear eyes still on Jim's.

"We don't know, Jack," Jim replied, like a soldier, "but I believe you will. The doctors we have seen out here don't seem able to say just what is the matter with you. They tell us to give you a chance to get stronger this summer and then take you east."

Jack closed her eyes for a few moments and lay perfectly still. Then she opened them and smiled a queer, little, twisted smile. "We haven't got the money to take me east, pard," she murmured, "and don't you sell any part of our ranch. I'll fool the doctors yet, but if I've got to be—ill," Jack ended, "why I'd rather be sick at home than any place in the world."

Jim cleared his throat and moved his chair so his companion could not look directly at him.

"Pardner," Jack said a few minutes afterwards, "I don't want to be impatient, but I do want to go home *now*. Couldn't you write and ask Mr. Harmon to give up the ranch a little sooner than October? They can't want to be at Rainbow Lodge as much as I do." She looked at the dark hill that rose straight up in front of their tiny ver-

andah and dreamed of the beautiful, spacious piazza in front of her home; with the grove of cottonwood trees ahead and on every side the stretch of the broad, wind-swept prairies, and sighed.

Jim felt such a rush of anger that his collar choked him. "I have written Mr. Harmon to ask him to let us come back; I knew you was homesick, boss," he returned slowly. "But Mr. Harmon says he can't give up the Lodge until his contract is over, says it's doing his daughter such a lot of good and she hasn't yet recovered from her nervous shock. Fine behavior from a man, when you saved his child's life!"

In half an hour, Ruth, Mr. Drummond, the girls and Carlos came trooping back from an effort to buy out the village. Peter was going to say good-by to Jack, and, as Ruth saw she was even paler than usual, she persuaded Jean to take the two children indoors. They had brought Jack everything they could find in the town, and Olive had a large package addressed to her friend in Elizabeth Harmon's writing, which she found at the post office. Listlessly Jack allowed Olive to cut the string and unwrap the pasteboard from about the flat envelope. Then Olive

held up before them all a new and beautiful photograph of the Rainbow Lodge—Aunt Ellen and Uncle Zack were standing in the yard, old Shep was resting on the steps of the porch and there was a suggestion of Jean's and Frieda's violet beds to one side. Poor Elizabeth had thought to give Jack a pleasure, but instead the sight of the home she longed for so intensely was more than the girl could bear after the strain of the afternoon. Suddenly she gave way and sobbed as she had not done since her accident. "I want to go home, I want to go home," Jack repeated, like a sick child.

Ruth dropped on the porch, hiding her face in the shawl that covered Jack. Olive and even Mr. Drummond were too choked to think of anything comforting to say. And as for Jim Colter, he got up and stalked off the verandah, marching up and down in the little yard like a caged animal whose anger and bitterness cannot be quietly endured.

Five minutes later it was surprising to see him reappear with a radiant expression, every wrinkle miraculously smoothed out of his face and his blue eyes smiling. He sat down in his chair and tenderly patted Jack's hand, then struck his knee with such a

resounding clap that everybody jumped and Jack laughed.

"What is it, Jim?" she inquired. "I am sorry I have been such a goose."

"Why, I have just been thinking what a parcel of idiots we are," he said happily. "You girls ain't ever thought much of it, but I want you to know that Rainbow Lodge ain't the only house on our place. What's the matter with the rancho? We ain't rented *it* to the Harmons, and the cowboys would be only too glad to turn out with me into some tents and hand our house over to you girls. What do you say to our taking the train for the Rainbow Ranch about the day after to-morrow? That will give me time to telegraph the boys to vacate. Think you could manage to make the trip in a sleeper, old girl, with me to see after you?" he demanded of Jack.

And the radiance of Jack's face, into which a slow rose color was creeping, was enough answer for them all.

CHAPTER XX

FRANK AND JACK

OLIVE, Frank, Jean, what's the use of being a professional invalid if I'm to be shamefully neglected?" a gay voice called, and Jacqueline Ralston, who was propped up in a big steamer chair on the porch of the rancho, banged the book she had been reading violently against the railing. A bright colored Mexican shawl covered her knees, she wore a red rose stuck carelessly in her hair, and the verandah on which she was enthroned was like a Spanish, American and Italian curiosity shop. Its rough wooden floor was overlaid with many varieties of Indian blankets, its walls were decorated with arrows, old pistols, a splendid pipe-rack of carved wood filled with discarded pipes; and the skins of wild animals. Every treasure possessed by the cowboys at the rancho had been brought forth to make an outdoor living room for "the boss," which had always been their title of affection for their youthful

employer. Two beautiful Spanish crepe shawls were draped artistically over the back of Jack's chair. Years before they had been purchased by two of the boys at the rancho from some Spanish peddlers and now, much to Jack's regret, they insisted that the shawls form a part of her porch decoration. On a table near the invalid sat a big Indian basket of sunflowers, another of oranges and grapes; a pile of magazines, which Frank Kent had ridden many miles to find, lay near a box of candy from Elizabeth Harmon and a vase of red roses sent by Peter Drummond all the way from California. And yet Jack was feeling aggrieved.

The ranch girls had been for little more than a week at the rancho. The third day after their arrival their old friend Frank Kent had appeared, refusing to be kept away any longer. He had expected to find a place to board in the neighborhood so that he could drive over each day to see the girls, but Jim had stored him away in one of the tents, saying he thought it good for the son "of a noble lord" to try roughing it, but really knowing that it would give Frank great pleasure to be with them. And until this morning Frank had never gotten without the sound of

Jack's voice if he thought there was any possibility of her needing him.

Jack was already much better and able to sit up with something to act as a brace behind her; she had more color and was beginning to be her old impatient self. Early in the day she had persuaded Ruth to ride out over the ranch with Jim. Ruth was tired, having unpacked and settled them at the rancho, and, besides, Jack was bored with Jim for being so slow in coming to the point with Ruth and wanted to give him another chance. She and Jean had been dreadfully disappointed that nothing had happened on their caravan trip, but Jack had not expected, when Ruth left her, to be deserted by the other ranch girls and Frank, for they had been given strict orders to stay at home and amuse her.

There were no trees to be seen from the front of the rancho as there were at the Lodge, but Jack could feast her eyes on the wide stretches of her beloved plains and see the cattle grazing in the last crop of alfalfa grass, which grows in fullest abundance in late August and is the color of amethyst. No human being was in sight but Carlos, who was playing with a rough, gray-furred animal that

looked like a cross and overgrown puppy. It was the baby wolf Carlos had found in the woods on the day he deserted Jack at the gold mine. The boy had desired to introduce it as a member of the caravan family, but, as it had not been found a cheerful traveling companion, Jim had shipped it home to the rancho and the cowboys had been amusing themselves with it. It growled and snapped and bit at everybody who came within reach of its chain, but in queer, silent Carlos it recognized a master spirit in the kinship of the wilderness and played with the boy in a perfectly tame and friendly way, as though he were its big brother.

"Come here, Carlos," Jack cried, "and please tell me what has become of everybody. There doesn't seem to be a soul around the place except you."

"I was told to stay near you," Carlos answered obediently. "Miss Jean said they were just homesick for a sight of the ranch and were going for a little walk. They would be back before you could miss them, for the two ladies from Rainbow Lodge are coming to see you. They should have come before so long a time."

"How did the girls and Mr. Kent get away

without my knowing?" Jack demanded wrathfully.

"By the trail that leads from the back door," Carlos returned calmly, and then as Jack seemed to have no more questions to ask, he returned to playing with his wolf dog.

Jack's face clouded and she sighed mournfully.

"How beastly selfish of everybody to leave me alone!" she thought angrily. "Ruth and Jim would be awfully cross if they knew. Of course Mrs. Harmon and Elizabeth are nice and sympathetic, but I don't feel as though I wanted to see them to-day. Beth isn't half so difficult as she used to be and is ever so much stronger, but she will talk about our accident all the time and Mrs. Harmon looks like she wanted to cry every time she glances at me. Oh, dear me, how I do hate to be pitied—it is almost the hardest thing I have to bear! I wonder if I ever will get used to it." And Jack put her thin hands, from which the brown strength had faded, over her flushed cheeks. "Anyhow, I am glad Jim has promised to wait a little longer before he sells any part of our ranch to the Harmons, though he says Mr. Harmon has offered him more money if we will make up our minds at

once. I suppose if I don't get a lot better pretty soon I will have to give up in the end and let Jim sell, since everybody wants to except me and I know they want to do it on my account."

For a few minutes Jack tried to find solace in the pages of her discarded book, but she sighed so heavily that the leaves fluttered.

"It's the dullest thing I ever read in my life," she said resentfully. "How I hate stories about wooden girls, who never have adventures or excitement in their lives, but just go to sewing circles and nice little picnics, where grown people preach to them about feminine ideals! It's like that tiresome poem, 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,'—as though one couldn't be good and clever too! There is no special glory in being good just because you are dull, and I sha'n't be any longer," Jack announced, flinging her book against the wall of the rancho with all the force she could muster.

"What's the matter, Jack?" Frank Kent asked, suddenly appearing around a corner of the house. "Do you wish anything?"

Jack had the grace to laugh at herself, though her eyes were filled with tears. "No, there is nothing really the matter, Frank.

I am not in pain nor anything like that," she answered, "so you need not look so sympathetic. I have just been feeling sorry for myself because all of you were wicked enough to take a walk about the dear old ranch when I could not go with you. And I used to think Elizabeth Harmon dreadfully silly when she was cross or complained. You see, I am finding out it is much easier to preach than to practice."

"Why, Jack, you didn't think we would be horrid enough to desert you," Frank protested. "It is rather my fault that you have been by yourself this long. Jean and Olive and I talked things over and thought it would be all right, so I sent them off for a walk with Donald Harmon and I slipped up to the Lodge and borrowed Elizabeth's cart. How would you like to drive down to Rainbow Creek and see if we can find the others?" Frank suggested casually, as though his request was a perfectly ordinary one.

Jack stared at him in amazement, her face radiant with pleasure, and then she shook her head nervously. She never had been farther than the front porch since her arrival at the rancho and now felt afraid to make the attempt.

"I don't think I dare try it, Frank," she returned wearily.

"All right. What shall we do—read or play cards or just talk?" he demanded cheerfully.

"Just talk," Jack answered. "Isn't it dreadful, Frank, but I have never liked sitting-still things in my life, reading or sewing or quiet games. Maybe my being sick will give me a chance to improve my mind," she added more courageously, seeing a shadow cross Frank's face.

At this moment Elizabeth Harmon's low governess cart drawn by a small ranch pony and driven by Uncle Zack came trotting down the road which led from the Lodge to the rancho.

"Come along, Jack, do. I'll take good care of you," Frank urged. "Uncle Zack and I can lift you in the cart and make you comfortable and it will do you lots of good to see the old creek and find out that you can get about the ranch even in this poor way."

"You are awfully good, Frank," Jack said gratefully, sitting up straighter than usual, so that one of her sofa cushions slid out on the floor. Uncle Zack had stopped the pony in front of the porch, gotten out, and Carlos was holding it. Jack put out both arms

toward Frank and Uncle Zack as naturally as a child, though a few weeks before there was nothing she felt she needed anyone's help to do. "Put me in the cart," she begged wistfully. "I am sure it won't hurt me and I'd rather see the sun glisten like gold on Rainbow Creek than any other sight in the world."

Frank drove slowly across a bridge that had been recently built over Rainbow Creek and along the path on the opposite side, where the girls used so often to ride. The sun was shining and the muddy water looked to Jack's adoring and homesick eyes like a stream of pure gold. Carlos sat on the floor of the cart and Jack was arranged like an Indian princess on one of the long side seats with her shawls and cushions around her.

"Oh, my goodness!" Jack said suddenly and turned so white that Frank reined in his pony and looked almost as pale as his companion.

"You don't feel ill, Jack, please say you don't," he begged boyishly, "or Mr. Colter and Miss Ruth will never forgive me for running off with you like this. We can go right back home now if you like."

Jack shook her head, smiling. "Oh, no, there is nothing the matter. I am just

beautifully comfortable and happier than I have been in a long time," she insisted. "But I was thinking that one morning Olive and Jean and I were riding along here, and over by the big rock we saw the fellow called 'Gypsy Joe' washing some stones and gravel in the creek. There was nothing so remarkable in his performance, but the thought of him reminded me of the fortune his mother told me the day before. The old gypsy did not like me and said I was so independent I was going to be forced to depend on other people. It is silly of me to think she could have had a premonition of my accident, isn't it? Have you seen this 'Gypsy Joe' around the ranch since you have been here, Frank?" Jack ended.

"Yes, twice. I believe Mr. Colter intends to look him up to-day and make him clear out. Suppose we rest here a while. Perhaps the girls may come along this way," Frank replied.

"Frank, there is the very pan 'Gypsy Joe' used when he was hunting for gold in our creek," Jack explained, pointing ahead. "Do get it for me. It's battered and ancient enough to look as though it belonged to the iron age and I'd like to see it."

Glad to see Jack taking an interest in little

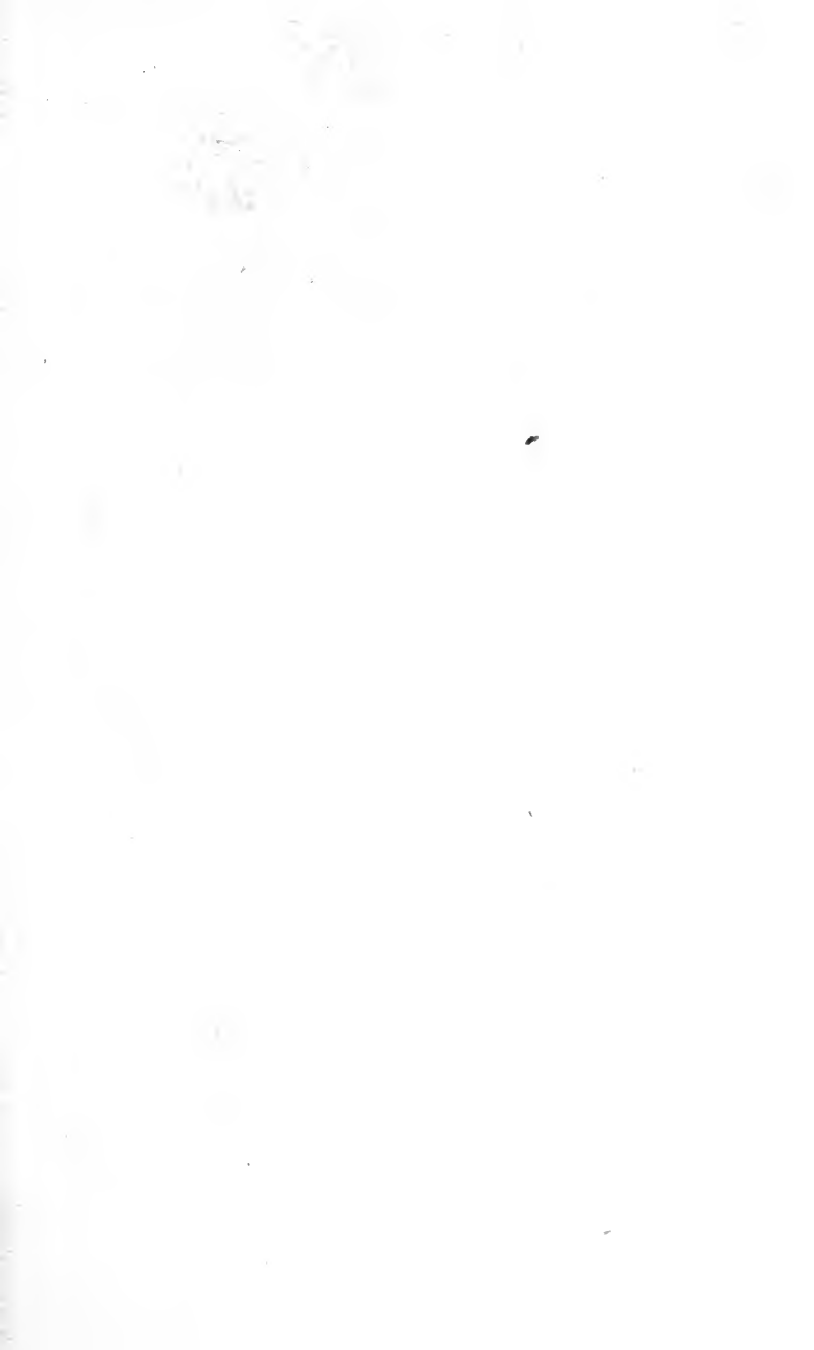
things again, Frank Kent hopped obediently out of the cart, giving the reins to Carlos.

"Climb into the rock there where it splits in two and forms a ravine and see if it's a golden treasure house, as the story books say," Jack suggested carelessly.

Picking up the old pan, the young man clambered easily into the open ledge of rock and got down on his knees among the bits of gravel and loose earth. The sun must have been shining more brilliantly on Rainbow Creek to-day than it ever shone on the rainbow rocks of the Yellowstone Park, for Frank imagined he could see tiny yellow veins running like threads through the big, gray rock and grains of golden dust mixed with the sand and pebbles in the crevices.

Jack laughed as she saw him hammering off small pieces of the rock with the end of his pocket knife. "Got the gold microbe too, Frank? Come on, don't let's wait any longer," she begged.

Apparently Frank Kent, who was a cool, clear-headed fellow, lost his mind, for he paid not the least attention to his companion, but filled his pan with bits of stone, sand and gravel from the big rock and marched to the edge of the creek. Quietly he held the pan





"THERE IS GOLD IN RAINBOW CREEK, JACK!"

on a level with the surface of the water and let it gradually sink until it filled with water; then he lifted it out, tipped it to one side and, as far as Jack could see from the cart, spilled all the water, mud and sand, so carefully collected, on the ground.

"Please hurry, Frank," Jack called, crossly this time. "I am getting tired and want to go back home."

When the young man returned to her he held out the tin pan she had wished for a souvenir, with an expression so unusual that the girl stared at him.

"What is it, for goodness' sake, Frank?" she demanded petulantly. Then even her indifferent eyes beheld small particles of a yellow metal clinging to the bottom of the old tin pan.

"There is gold in Rainbow Creek, Jack!" Frank remarked with the quiet self-control she once disliked in him. "I don't know how much, of course, and it may be in such small quantities that it will amount to nothing. We must not get too excited, but I have not been studying gold mining in Colorado all summer without learning something about it. Let's don't say anything of our discovery just yet. I will take you home now

and come back this afternoon to see what I can find out. If Rainbow Creek is bringing gold down from the mountains back of it or gathering it from the rocks and soil along its shores you may be able to do some placer mining that will make you richer than your wildest dreams."

The two young people hardly dared speak of their hopes on their drive to the rancho, and Carlos was solemnly sworn to secrecy. They were both excited, but Frank feared he had done wrong in agitating Jack before he was sure of his discovery, and Jack dared not trust herself to think of what the finding of gold on their ranch might mean in its effect on their future.

As soon as Jack was safe at home with Olive, Jean and Frieda, Frank disappeared. At supper time he had not come back to the rancho; the evening wore on until it was the hour for the invalid to be put to bed, and still he had not come. Jack was feeling sure that Frank had made a mistake and glad they had kept their idea to themselves so that no one should share their disappointment, when the door of the small sitting room at the rancho opened and Frank Kent walked quietly in. His first glance was for Jack, and

his face was so pale and serious the others feared some misfortune.

The living room of the rancho was an odd place and yet a fitting one for Frank's disclosure. The room was small, of rough pine boards, with bright chromos and photographs of famous horses tacked on its walls. The chairs were worn and the other odd bits of furniture as primitive as possible. But to-night a bright fire glowed in the big fireplace. Jack lay on an old leather lounge with a rose-colored shawl draped over her, Jean sat at her feet, and Frieda and Olive were on sofa cushions before the fire. Jim was smoking comfortably in the corner, his face almost in shadow, yet wearing an expression of happiness that glowed like an inner radiance. His eyes were fixed on Ruth, though she alone was restless to-night and kept flitting about on unnecessary errands, with her cheeks deeply flushed from her long day out of doors.

Frank walked directly up to Jim Colter.

"Mr. Colter," he announced without wasting time, "I find you have gold on the Rainbow Ranch. I have been examining the bed of your creek all afternoon and as far as I can tell it is encrusted with fine particles of gold. I don't want you to trust to my

judgment, but I do want you to send immediately for some one who knows more of placer mining than I do, for I believe we are on the verge of a great discovery."

All of the girls, except Jack, laughed and Ruth shrugged her shoulders.

"The thing is quite impossible, Frank!" Ruth argued. "I don't mean to doubt your word, but Mr. Colter could not have lived on the ranch all these years without finding out whether there was gold in the creek."

"Oh, yes, I could, Ruth," Jim answered slowly. "I told you I didn't know a chunk of gold from a lump of mud. I—" Jim always talked slowly, but to-night it seemed as though his words would never come—"I ain't one to go off half cocked and I'm a pretty hard fellow to convince of good luck, but I believe what Kent has found out is true. I have been puzzling my brains ever since we come home to know why this man Harmon is so anxious to buy our ranch that he will give almost any price for it and why he has had Joe Dawson hanging around here all summer. Seems like I kind'er guess now. Dawson found the gold lode and Harmon thought it would be a good business to buy the ranch and take his chances on striking

it rich before we got on to things. Girls, you've got to take Mr. Kent's advice and keep this discovery a secret until we find out for sure if there is enough gold on the ranch for us to get happy." Jim lowered his voice. "Who can we send for to investigate for us, whom we can trust with our secret?"

"Ralph Merrit," Jean suggested.

"Ralph Merrit, the very man!" Jim replied instantly. "Who would have thought of your having so much practical sense, Jean? But don't get excited over this business, for heaven's sake, don't get excited," he repeated, charging up and down the room like a lion. "I tell you all is not gold that glitters and there is many a slip between——"

"The creek and the lip, Jim," Jean ended roguishly, and everybody laughed and went away to dream; Ruth and Jim of something even more important than the discovery of a gold mine.

CHAPTER XXI

"MY WAY'S FOR LOVE"

FOR Ruth and Jim Colter had spent a wonderful day together while Jack and Frank Kent were making their great discovery. They were finding another of the world's great treasures which is not gold. Side by side they had ridden slowly over the ranch with its waving fields of ripened grass and its horses, sheep and cattle, sleek and fat and well content with the earth's bounty. They had counted the herds and inspected the sheep corrals, ordering new ones to be built before the coming of winter; they had discussed whether Ruth alone would be able to take Jack to New York to see the famous surgeon recommended by Peter Drummond, and they had decided that Mr. Harmon must be given an answer in regard to his purchase of a portion of Rainbow Ranch within the next few days. His lease on the Lodge would end in a short time and already he seemed very restless and was insisting

that urgent business called him back to New York.

Ruth was now able to ride horseback almost as well as the other ranch girls, although she could never be quite so fearless, since her training had come later in life. But to-day she and her companion laughingly recalled her famous arrival at Wolfville not a year before and her terrible ten-mile ride home to Rainbow Lodge. Ruth remembered then—though she did not speak of it—how Jim's strength had upheld and comforted her and brought her safely to her new home.

At noon, hungry and happy, Jim and Ruth had eaten their luncheon seated opposite each other on the grass with two napkins spread between them, drinking their cold coffee out of bottles, like a couple of school children on a picnic.

Now it was almost sunset and the man and woman were riding slowly home. Their backs were to the far-off line of hills, and beyond them the level prairies seemed to stretch on and on until they dipped and melted away at the uttermost rim of the earth. Above, the clouds floated, tinted like soap bubbles against a skyey background of pale rose and blue, for the sun was sinking

without a display of gaudy colors upon the horizon, that marked this waning season of the year.

Ruth was gazing at the sunset, wondering if Jack were not a little better, when a low laugh from her companion surprised her and jarred on her peaceful mood. She turned on him reproachfully, but found nothing in Jim Colter's expression that spoke of laughter. His strong bronze face was so serious and his lips so grave that the girl with him was suddenly still and frightened. For many weeks she had thought this moment might be approaching, and yet, now it had come, she was wholly unprepared.

"I was only thinking of how young you look in that riding habit, Miss Ruth," Jim said simply. "I laughed because I remembered I thought you would be an old maid of fifty when you first came out to the ranch. Sometimes it seems years since the day you arrived, and then again only a few weeks. Are you sure you like living on a ranch now? You know you plumb hated it when you first came to Wyoming," he said boyishly.

Ruth smiled and nodded, wondering if she were relieved or disappointed. One could always count on Jim's not doing or saying the

thing expected of him. After all, the moment she anticipated was not at hand.

"Of course I dearly love living on the ranch, Mr. Jim. But why do you ask me?" she answered.

"Because I love you, Ruth," Jim returned as quietly as though he had not been trying to speak the three magic words for months. "And I am a ranchman and don't know anything else. I don't understand a whole lot about women, but I believe they ought to like the kind of life a man has to offer before they tie up with him. If you hadn't come to like living out here I never would have told you I loved you, though it had eaten my heart out to keep silent. But you do care for the life now, Ruth, and—do you think you can care for me?"

The two horses were walking slowly side by side, and Jim put out a big warm hand and closed it slowly over Ruth's small cold ones which still held her reins. "I am only an overseer, and haven't much money or education to offer you, and I know how much these things count, but I will do my best for you and I do come of good people, dear, and it wasn't their fault I never learned more——" Jim added at last, hesitating as

understand that this trinity of simple emotions meant the big human mystery of love.

"Of course you may have all the time you need, Ruth," Jim replied, not showing his disappointment. "You may have all my life if it takes you that long to find out. But it would be easier for us both if you decide this week. 'Tain't fair for a man to expect a woman to say her yes or no right off at the first asking. He has had all the time beforehand to decide that he wants her to be his wife, but she ain't supposed to think of him as a husband until he has said the word. At least, that is the kind of woman you are, Ruth, and there are plenty like you. I suppose, though, there are some that do a little previous deciding before the male has got right down to the point." Jim was patting Ruth's hands softly, his eyes full of a new content and his face of strength and dignity. Not having a New England conscience he did not feel it necessary to worry, because he could see Ruth cared; and he was willing to wait for the rest.

They were not talking, so the sound of two voices startled them. Through a small clump of evergreen trees, not far from the trail along which they were riding, the smoke

of a camp-fire rose in slow circles. A young woman was seated on the ground nursing a baby, and a man and old gypsy woman were scolding at each other.

"It's that fellow, Joe Dawson. I have been having an eye open for him all day," Jim announced curtly, with the sudden sternness in his face and manner that made him feared even by the people who knew him most intimately. "I have been wanting to tell him to clear off this ranch. No matter what business Harmon has with him, he sha'n't stay about here, now you and the girls have come home."

Jim was riding over toward the gypsies, but Joe had seen him and come forward.

"Good evening," he remarked. "Pleasant evening for a ride."

Jim frowned and wasted no words.

"Glad I came across you, Dawson," he returned. "I want you to get off this ranch. I'll give you two days if it takes that much time, but no longer. I told you I wasn't going to have you hanging about here in the early part of the summer, but I presume you have been doing some work for Mr. Harmon, though I never heard of your doing any honest work in your life."

"Oh, no, I haven't reformed to the extent of some people," Gypsy Joe remarked sarcastically. "At least I haven't yet taken to playing the part of 'gardeen' to a parcel of young girls. But look here, John, I can get ugly same as other folks, and it ain't any the less true for being an old saying, 'you had better let sleeping dogs lie.' I can wake up and bite; and I've an idea where it would hurt you the most."

Ruth was walking her horse up and down not far away, trying not to hear what the two men were saying, but they were so angry that their voices carried for some distance on the quiet evening air.

"Get off the Rainbow Ranch, Joe Dawson, or you will be put off," Jim replied roughly, and turned and rode back to Ruth.

The man laughed insolently. "Not if I don't choose to leave, John Carter," he halloed. "You've made the mistake of your life in not making friends with me again, for I can get even with you in more ways than one, and I don't know but that I'll try."

These were the words Ruth thought she heard, but she gave them little heed beyond wondering idly why the impudent tramp called Jim by the wrong name.

These events in the lives of Ruth Drew and Jim Colter took place on the same day that Jack and Frank Kent had their experience by the waters of Rainbow Creek. They had been at home several hours when Frank Kent appeared to disclose the startling news of the discovery of gold deposits on the ranch. It was not until then that Jim Colter guessed why Mr. Harmon had wished to purchase all or a portion of the Rainbow Ranch before its owners could find out the secret of their hidden wealth, and for this same reason had kept the first discoverer of the gold, “Gypsy Joe,” lurking about the ranch all summer and had refused to give up the Lodge to the Ralston girls and let them come home when they wished.

CHAPTER XXII

A PARTY AT THE RANCHO

RALPH MERRIT arrived in two days at the Rainbow Ranch; and he, Frank and Jim worked continuously in the vicinity of the muddy creek. Soon there was little doubt of the wonderful value of the diggings, for the miners, even with primitive methods of gold washing, found lumps of pure gold varying in size from a pea to a marble.

Jim was distracted. News of the find began to spread about the neighborhood and the ranch to be crowded with curiosity seekers of every kind, miners looking for jobs, tramps and ne'er-do-weels, besides kind and officious neighbors. Sternly as the ranch girls were ordered to remain in the house, Jean and Olive and Frieda had ways of stealing down to the creek on remarkably plausible errands; a message for Jim from Ruth, an inquiry from Jack to Frank Kent as to how things were going, and if Jean appeared with a pot of hot coffee for the workmen, she used to manage

to find Ralph and sit and talk to him, until Jim scolded and made her go back to the ranch house.

It was pretty hard on Jack, who would have been the leading spirit in everything, to remain all day on the little porch without stirring, but Ruth rarely left her and there was a new bond of sympathy between them. Jack had guessed that her old and dearest friend had asked their chaperon to marry him and that Ruth was waiting to come to a decision, but Jack felt little doubt of her answer. Most of the time Jim Colter was obliged to be away from home—there was never a chance for a quiet moment with Ruth—machinery had to be ordered for the new mine, legal formalities to be gone through with. But just once Jim spared an hour for an interview with Mr. Harmon; and in a short time afterwards the New York financier announced to his family that they would leave Rainbow Lodge within the next few days. Fortunately Joe Dawson had disappeared and Jim was spared this additional annoyance.

Early one morning Ruth came down late to breakfast at the rancho to find a note from Jim saying he had been called away for

the day and asking her to wait up for him until he got back that night.

Ralph Merrit and Frank Kent had finished eating and were deep in the consideration of the newest and most approved methods of placer mining. A hydraulic monitor was to be set up and Rainbow Creek dammed so that the water could be piped to the workings. Already negotiations had been started with a neighbor for a part of his water supply, so that the cattle business of the ranch need not be given up.

For the moment Jean, Olive and Frieda were listening to the conversation of the boys. It was most unusual, for the greater part of their time was now devoted to an endless discussion of what they would do when they were rich. But the ranch girls' idea of wealth was limited. Jean, who had the most gifted imagination of the four, had only conceived of a fortune of about ten thousand dollars.

"How's Jack, Ruth?" Jean inquired, as soon as their chaperon entered the breakfast room. "You are so late I feel kind-of worried."

"Jack's all right," Ruth answered.

"Then tell her we are awfully sorry to

leave her again to-day, but some of the new machinery has just arrived, and Frank and Ralph have promised to explain it to us. We won't be back until after lunch," Jean ended.

Ruth frowned. "Jack is pretty tired of just *my* society," she said. "You girls are away nearly all of the time. Don't you think we could think of something to amuse her? Everybody else is out of doors from breakfast till dinner and too tired at night to talk."

Jean flushed and Olive's eyes filled with tears.

"I'll not leave the house, Ruth," Olive replied. "I have been so excited lately it has never dawned on me that I was neglecting Jack. I don't see how I can have been so selfish!"

"I wish I could stay too, Miss Ruth," Frank Kent added; "but with Mr. Colter away I can't leave Merrit to shoulder the whole work."

"The Harmons are coming down to the rancho some time to-day to say good-by to Jack; you know they are leaving for New York in the morning," Jean interposed, feeling conscience-smitten, but anxious to escape a scolding.

All this time Frieda had been silent, but

now she clapped her hands together so suddenly that she made everybody in the room start. "I have a perfectly lovely idea," she announced. "Let's give Jack a surprise party. We need not ask any outside people except the Harmons, for poor Jack can't dance or play many games any more, but she will like the surprise, I know."

Ruth leaned over and kissed Frieda; and there was a moment of silence. The girls were thinking that money would mean very little to any one of them if Jack did not regain her strength.

"It's a beautiful plan, Frieda," Jean answered at last, with hot cheeks. "We will stay at home to-day and decorate the rancho so no one will know it to-night. I suppose it will be nice to have a farewell party for the Harmons. We ought not to show that we have any feeling against them, but it is pretty hard," she concluded.

"Jack does not believe that Elizabeth or Donald or Mrs. Harmon knew why Mr. Harmon wanted to buy our ranch," Ruth interposed.

"Donald Harmon knew," Olive interrupted quietly, but no one could persuade her to say how she had found this out.

By half-past seven the front of the rancho was hung with Japanese lanterns. On the old divan in the sitting room Jack was enthroned like an Oriental princess; with her blue crepe shawl draped over a blue muslin gown and a wreath of red roses in her coronet of gold hair.

Peter Drummond had at last returned to his home in New York without paying a visit to the ranch, but never a week passed that he did not send a large box of red roses to Jack with a letter urging her to hurry to New York.

The girls had decided to have a fancy dress party, and, as there was no time for preparation, their costumes were an odd assortment of all the odds and ends they could find. Early in the day, when Jack guessed that something unusual was to take place, Ruth decided that she would enjoy the preparations more than the surprise. So it was she who helped dress Olive, who never looked so lovely in her life. Quite by accident her odd costume exactly suited her. She wore a simple white dress, with a short jacket of gold embroidery, and a round, gold-embroidered cap on her loose black hair; and around her throat on a chain the silver

cross which she had found in the sandalwood box hidden by old Laska.

Jean and Frieda in kimonos, with sashes about their waists, were Japanese geisha girls, and found their costumes excessively inconvenient in their efforts to help Ralph Merrit freeze the ice cream in the back yard.

Olive and Jack were waiting for the party to begin; when Elizabeth Harmon arrived early to say good-by to Jack alone; and Olive stole out on the porch of the rancho to wait.

Frank Kent, in his evening clothes, coming from his tent across the fields on his way into the house, spied Olive. Suddenly he remembered the frightened, ignorant girl who had sought shelter at the Rainbow Ranch less than a year before; and marveled at the change. He stopped for a moment; and in the stiff English fashion, which no amount of American experience would make him lose, said admiringly: "I say, Miss Olive, you are looking awfully pretty to-night. I want to tell you how glad I am that you have never had any more trouble from the Indian woman and that things are now so jolly for you," and then he passed on indoors to find Jack.

Ten minutes later Donald and Mrs. Harmon

found Olive still on the porch ready to receive them. Mrs. Harmon took Olive's hand and then dropped it and stared at her curiously. The image of a half-forgotten face came back to her; somewhere in her past had she not seen a girl who looked like this Olive Ralston? Yet when and where had she seen her?

"Olive," Mrs. Harmon questioned, for a moment losing her reserve and caution, "have you any Spanish or Italian ancestors? I have no right to be curious about you, but you are so unlike the other ranch girls, and I remember Jack said you were only an adopted sister."

Olive shook her head; but she looked straight at the older woman and there was something in her timid, appealing gaze that gave another pull to the chords of memory.

"I don't know anything about my people, Mrs. Harmon," Olive answered with quiet dignity. "Since you seem interested to know, I was brought up by an old Indian woman and her son, until Jack and the other girls found me and brought me home to live with them. I don't even know my own name."

A hundred questions came to Mrs. Har-

mon's mind and almost forced themselves from her lips, but she was resolutely silent. Why should she care to know more of this stray girl's past history; what could it mean to her? If she knew nothing she could always assure herself that the suspicion that had just crossed her mind was an absurdity. Without another word, followed by Olive and Donald, they entered the rancho.

At ten o'clock the party was going successfully. But Ruth found her interest waning; it seemed almost time for Jim to come home.

She *must* see him alone to tell him that life was worth while to her now only because of his love. Jim was not like other men, he was better and braver and stronger; the woman who loved him believed she trusted him utterly.

It was a clear, starlit night without a moon. Silently Ruth slipped away from the familiar company, and wrapping a white shawl around her, stole from the house along the trail.

A man came down the path toward her and she ran forward with hands outstretched to meet him. Then she stopped short, her heart fluttering and her knees trembling.

CHAPTER XXIII

"THEIR LAST RIDE TOGETHER"

GOOD evening, Miss Drew," some one said politely.

Ruth drew in her breath. "Good evening," she returned coldly.

"Kind of surprised to see me?" "Gypsy Joe" inquired. "You have been having great goings on about the ranch lately. I could have told you about your gold mine in the early part of the summer, but I knew this man Harmon would give me a better show than your overseer if I put him on to my discovery and he got your ranch away from you."

Ruth turned irresolutely and then faced the man again. "Please don't talk to me of your dishonesty," she protested, "and do get off the ranch right away. You know what Mr. Colter told you." Ruth had a frightened vision of Jim's returning to find this tramp lurking about the rancho, and knew she would have small chance for a

quiet evening with her lover after such a catastrophe.

"Look here, Miss Drew, don't you think you might speak a good word to your overseer and the young ladies for me?" Dawson whined. "Seems like it isn't fair for me to have been the first to discover that gold mine and not to have any share in it."

Ruth shrugged her shoulders. "We really can't help that. If you had told Mr. Colter of it first I am sure he would have been fair with you. Surely it is not our fault that you have cheated yourself in trying to cheat us. I really don't see how we owe you anything!"

"Jim Colter, as he calls himself, owes me a whole lot. Say, I'm hard up. Do you think you could get Colter to give me a job as a miner?" "Gypsy Joe" urged. "They say the men are making a pretty good thing out of that."

Slowly Ruth shook her head, knowing that Jim, who was the most gentle of men and the most yielding in little things, was like adamant once his mind was made up.

"I don't know what there is between you and Mr. Colter," Ruth answered hurriedly, "but I'm sure I could not make him change

his opinion of you even if I wished to try. Do, do go away from here."

"I won't," the man replied. "You've got to hear something first." Ruth made a movement, but he caught at her skirts. "I'm all-fired tired of this man Colter's being so hard on me and having all the people around here treat him like a tin god. I am not living under an assumed name and he is. I have never done anything to make me proud of being called Joe Dawson, but I don't have to hide it. Colter!" Joe Dawson laughed. "Your friend is no more named Colter than I am. His name is Carter, John Carter, and he hails from Virginia the same as I do. Colter was a pretty good name to select when he came west, since a man named Colter happened to be one of the first settlers in Wyoming."

"Be quiet and let me go, Mr. Dawson!" Ruth commanded, white with anger. "Of course you understand I don't believe a word you have said, but you sha'n't force me to listen to your slander."

"Oh, don't take my word for it," Dawson sneered. "Ask Carter if he didn't run away from home because he stole a lot of money and broke his mother's and father's hearts.

The Carters are a proud lot and not forgiving, and I expect they weren't sorry to have him change his name to Colter. He and I were school-fellows together, and we have never been friendly."

The man let go of her skirts, and Ruth ran back toward the rancho while he walked off in the other direction. There could not be a word of truth in what he had told her, yet the girl felt sick and trembling and dared not go in where her friends could see her. Crying softly, Ruth dropped down in the grass by the side of the road. Suddenly it occurred to her that Jim had never told her one word of his past history and that the ranch girls knew nothing of him before his coming to Wyoming; yet she had confided every detail of her own narrow story to him, her school days in Vermont and the teaching afterward, and then there was nothing else until she came out west to him.

A horse trotted along the road and shied at the white figure in the grass.

"Ruth, is anything the matter?" Jim asked in astonishment, recognizing her at once.

"Nothing, only I was waiting for you," Ruth answered.

Jim had ridden close up to her. Now he leaned down from his horse and lifted her up in the saddle with him. "Let's don't go in to the house now, Ruth," he whispered. "I want to ride with you, alone."

Ruth did not have to speak, for she yielded herself utterly to Jim's strength and tenderness. With a touch to his horse the man and woman rode on, feeling the night wind of the prairies with its thousand fragrances blow over them; seeing the sky with its ten million stars above them and the great wide sweep of the open country beneath.

"It has been more than a week, Ruth, and I am weary of waiting," Jim said, when his horse grew tired and they were moving toward home.

She turned her face toward him, flushed now with the joy of the night and the stars and the new love that enthralled her. "You know I love you, Jim," she murmured caressingly, "and I would rather be your wife than any man's in the world."

After this there did not seem to be need for speech; but the man walked his horse slowly, hoping that it might take forever before they reached home.

Then Ruth said carelessly, because the

tramp's story had passed out of her thoughts until this moment: "Jim, don't be angry—I didn't want to listen, but you must make that fellow, Joe Dawson, stop telling dreadful stories about you. Why, I met him to-night and he told me such absurd things. He said _____,"

Suddenly the man's arm stiffened about the woman he loved. "He said what, Ruth?" Jim Colter inquired with a new note in his voice.

Ruth laughed nervously and clung more closely to him, as though she feared to slip from her seat. "Just that your name was John Carter and not Jim Colter. Please don't make me tell you any more of his stories," she begged.

"I would like to hear all, Ruth; it will be better for us in the end," Jim insisted.

"But I'm ashamed," the girl argued, "because it is so utterly unlike you or anything you could do. You know, I believe you are the soul of honor, Jim, yet this man said you had stolen money when you were a young man, and run away from home to hide."

"The man told you the truth, Ruth," Jim Colter answered. "Don't be frightened. I have done wrong, for I should have told you before.

My name is John Carter under the law, though I have borne the name of Jim Colter for fourteen years and it seems far more like my own name than the other, for I have learned to be a man under it."

Ruth drew herself away, clinging to the horse's mane, her body rigid and her tears dry.

"You mean you have been deceiving me and have asked me to marry you without my knowing your real name?" she asked, all her fear and suspicion of men returning. If Jack had once hated what she called "Ruth's schoolmarm manner," Jim Colter was now to know her in the light of an upright judge.

"Of course I meant to tell you my story some day, Ruth," he replied almost too humbly. "I thought things over a long time and I didn't see how I was doing you any harm to keep my old name and past a secret from you until you learned to love me. Maybe I was mistaken, but I didn't want you to love the man I used to be, I wanted you to love the man I am now. I could see that you were growing more understanding every day about little things, and not so hard and narrow, and I thought maybe

if you loved me you'd be able to forgive something that happened so many years ago it seems almost like a bad dream."

"I never could marry anyone who deceived me," the girl returned frigidly.

"I wasn't deceiving you, I was just waiting to tell you. Maybe you will listen to the story now?" Jim asked. "It won't take long." Then before Ruth could reply he went on: "My father and mother had two sons, and I was the older. We were an old Virginia family and had been rich before the war. I was a good-for-nothing fellow, never studied, had no ambition and used to spend all of my time out of doors. My brother Ben was a different sort, a brilliant, studious chap, and we believed he would some day restore the family fortunes. After graduating at the high school he went to Richmond to study law, but as I had never studied anything there was nothing for me to do but to get a job as clerk in a store in our town. Both of us were boys at this time, Ben twenty and I only a little older. One night pretty late I was alone in the store, and Ben appeared, saying he had come down from Richmond because he had to have three hundred dollars quick, that very night. Well, I knew that

father and mother and I didn't have thirty dollars between us. Ben suggested that I borrow the money from my employer, as I knew the combination of his safe. In a few days Ben was sure he would have the money to pay back and I could explain the whole situation. I am not excusing myself, Ruth. I knew I was sinning when I borrowed another man's money without his consent. Ben couldn't pay back, and I told the man I worked for what I had done. I offered to take any punishment the law ordered and then to come back to his shop and work until I paid him the last cent. The man forgave me, Ruth, and was willing to let me work out my salvation; but there was one thing I had not counted on, and that was family pride. When my father and mother learned what I had done they asked me to leave town, change my name and never to come home again."

"Did they know you took the money for your brother?" Ruth queried.

Jim shook his head. "What was the use? My sin was just the same. I paid the man back years ago, Ruth. Now can you forgive me?"

"I am sorry, Jim," Ruth answered kindly,

but in a manner as remote from him and his need as though she had been a thousand miles away. "I am sure you will understand, but I must take back my promise. I can't be the wife of a man who has done wrong, no matter how much he has repented. Has no one ever known of what you did in all these years?"

"One man besides Joe Dawson, who is the nephew of the man from whom I took the money," Jim returned. "He was John Ralston. I told him my story a few days before he died and he left me the guardian of his little girls, to manage their property until Jack is twenty-one." And this was the only defense Jim Colter ever made for himself.

By and by he put Ruth down on the porch of the rancho and went away to his tent for the night. In the morning he had gone from Rainbow Ranch to attend to other business.

CHAPTER XXIV

FAREWELL TO THE RAINBOW RANCH

THE coming of late September to the neighborhood of the ranch brought with it a storm and heavy down-pour of rain.

"The very clouds themselves weep at the thought of our departure from the Rainbow Ranch," Jean exclaimed dramatically, pressing her piquant nose against the rain-splashed window of the living room in the Lodge and gazing out over the mist-dimmed fields.

"Does anybody know where Ruth is?" Jack inquired from a big sofa near the fire, looking about their beloved sitting room with an expression of unfailing affection. "She must be nearly worn out with packing and getting us ready to start to New York tomorrow. I do wish she would rest for a few minutes these days."

"Ruth has gone for a ride in the rain alone, Jack," Olive explained, stooping over her friend and arranging her pillows. "She said

she thought it would do her more good than anything, and she will stop by the post box at the gate and bring us the last mail. Yes, Frieda, dear, I will help you in a minute, but please don't crowd any more treasures into that box or you will have everything smashed to bits."

For a moment Frieda ceased her occupation of jamming odd-shaped pieces of Indian pottery into a packing trunk filled with blankets, shawls, beadwork, dolls, Indian carvings, everything known to Indian manufacture, and surveyed the older girls reproachfully. "Olive, I thought you and Jean said that the one thing that would give you pleasure and keep us from just dying of homesickness would be to fix up an Indian sitting room at that horrid old boarding school we are going to in New York," she protested.

Riches, like everything else in this world, brings its responsibilities. The ranch girls and Ruth Drew were to leave the Rainbow Ranch soon after daylight next morning for the long trip across the country which was to land them in New York City. Now that the gold supply of Rainbow Creek was increasing day by day until no one could guess how vast the amount would be, Jim Colter had

decided it would be best for the girls to leave the ranch. Jack was to see a famous surgeon, hoping that he would be able to restore her to health, for she had not improved to any extent and was still unable to walk or to sit up for any length of time. The other girls were to be placed in a fashionable boarding school near a village on the Hudson River, not far from New York City, and Jack was to join them when she got well. No one ever said "if" Jack got well; it was always "when," and she always talked of herself in this way, for her courage was yet undaunted.

Frank Kent was to act as escort to the travelers, as he was returning soon to his home in England, and Ralph Merrit was to be left as one of the engineers in charge of the Rainbow Mine. Jim Colter had not been at the ranch except once and then only for a few days since the night of his ride with Ruth.

"Goodness, children, you do look comfortable," Ruth announced, coming in the door at this minute, with her coat and hat heavy with rain. "Here, Jack, is a letter in Jim's handwriting. It is a pretty thick one, so I suppose he has written to say why he is letting you girls go away from home without coming to say good-by to you."

Ruth looked older and a little worn, but her expression was cold and reserved. She could not understand why Jim had hardly seen or spoken to her since their last long talk; it had never been a part of her plan not to be friends with him.

Slowly Jack read the first of her letter, while Frieda and Jean fairly danced with impatience and Olive stood with her arm about Carlos, who had crept in softly behind Ruth. The boy was to stay behind at the ranch with "The Big White Chief" he adored, yet he was solemn and desolate at the thought of the departure of the girls.

"Jim is desperately sorry, but he can't get here in time to see us start to-morrow," Jack read slowly. "Don't cry, Frieda. He sends you a dozen kisses and says you are to buy the biggest doll in New York as soon as you get there, as a present from him."

Frieda sniffed, her eyes brimming with tears. "Jim's silly; I'm too big for dolls," she answered, "and I just can't see why he don't come home!" She was about to break down and cry, but Jean knew this would mean the signal for them all to weep, so she stamped her foot indignantly. "Frieda Ralston, don't you dare shed a tear for Jim

Colter or any other man," she commanded. "If Jim does not love us enough to want to say good-by to us then he can stay away. Come on, baby. I can smell hot gingerbread, so let's get some. Aunt Ellen thinks we are going to starve to death when we leave the Lodge. Perhaps we may have to eat solid gold food like poor King Midas, now that Rainbow Creek has given us the golden touch." Jean flitted from the room, holding Frieda's hand, and Olive and Carlos followed. When they had gone Ruth sat on the floor in front of the fire near Jack's couch, waiting while she finished her letter.

By and by Jack looked over at Ruth thoughtfully, and there was an expression in her gray eyes that made Ruth suddenly shield her face with her hand.

"Jim has written me everything, Ruth," Jack said. "Please don't be angry. He and I have been such pals since I was a little girl, and he didn't want me to go away thinking he had neglected me when I was ill. As though I would! Foolish old Jim! He has written me too about some wicked thing he did years and years ago. Now he thinks maybe he ought to have told me before, because I might not have wished him to run the ranch and to

take care of our money if I had known." Jack was smiling, though the tears were running down her cheeks. "And the last thing he writes is—that he won't be hurt if I get a man to superintend his work and to look over his accounts. Of course Jim is willing to continue to work for us almost for nothing; but now that we are going to be so rich he thinks we might like a guardian with a different history." Jack choked in her effort to pretend indignation. "As though anything Jim Colter ever did in the past keeps him from being the most splendid and unselfish person in the whole world now!" she ended loyally with a look of utter bewilderment at her companion.

Ruth leaned so near the fire that her cheeks flushed and her eyes shone from the heat of the glowing ashes. "Do you really feel that way about Jim, dear?" she questioned wonderingly. "I can't understand it."

"I can't understand feeling any other way, Ruth," Jack answered. "But I know people look at things differently. And Jim said I was never to speak of this to you or to try to influence you in any way—so please forgive me; I never will again."

Ruth made no reply and was unchanged in her determination, although her heart was heavy with the thought of turning her back on the Rainbow Ranch and all the wonderful things it had meant to her. They were to return she knew not when. Silently she slipped away, and Jack Ralston was left alone in the firelight. Her eyes were soon closed, and in a little while she must have been dreaming, for some one touched her and a familiar voice said with a slow drawl: "How you feeling, boss?"

Jack pulled herself up by catching at Jim's strong hands and laughed her old gay, teasing laugh. "You couldn't stay away, could you, pard? My, what a bluff you are! I suppose you guessed how furiously angry we were with you for not coming home to say good-by."

Jim laughed a little huskily. "You're right, as usual, Miss Ralston. I couldn't let my girls go away off to New York without making them promise to behave themselves. You must not let money and rich people fool and spoil you until you forget all about the dear old ranch." Jim patted Jack's hand softly. "I wasn't going to play the coward either, Jack, now it's come to the point. I am

going to tell Ruth good-by and wish her good luck."

"Remember a motto I once said I was going to take for the Rainbow Ranch, Jim?" Jack asked gravely. "It was 'never say die,' and if you won't forget it, pard, I won't." And the man and girl shook hands like friends between whom no other words were necessary.

Frieda, coming back to her sister, heard Jim's voice and raised the alarm. In the midst of the group of laughing and enthusiastic girls Ruth was able to greet Jim as she would have done many months before.

The rain ceased and just before an early tea Jim lifted Jack and carried her out on the great porch in front of Rainbow Lodge. A giant rainbow spanned the heavens, and they wished to take a farewell of their beloved ranch with the arch of promise above them.

"See, Frieda, dear," Jack called gayly, "the rainbow does dip into the creek where we found our pot of gold. I told you it ended on our place, and that's why father gave it the name of 'The Rainbow Ranch.'"

Frieda shook her head, not being gifted with a vivid imagination. "I can't see it, sister," she argued seriously. "The rainbow just slips off in the sky somewhere. But I know

a verse of poetry that Ruth taught me. Would you like me to say it?"

Everybody nodded with their eyes resting lovingly on the beautiful rain-washed fields of the ranch, shining now with a new, colorful beauty from the reflected glory in the heavens.

Frieda walked out in the yard facing her audience, her long blond pigtails quivering with the importance of her position, and her turquoise eyes shining with interest. Quite unconscious of her small self, with her gaze fastened on Jack, she raised one dimpled arm, reciting proudly:

"O beautiful rainbow, all woven of light!
There's not in thy tissue one shadow of night;
Heaven surely is open when thou dost appear,
And bending above thee, the angels draw near
And sing: 'The Rainbow! The Rainbow!
The smile of God is here.'"

The next book in this series devoted to the histories of the ranch girls will find them living in a totally new environment. How they are to enjoy the life of a fashionable boarding school; how their unconventional ideas will influence their school mates; what effect their sudden possession of great wealth will have upon them, and whether Jack will find her

health, Olive her parentage, and what will develop for Ruth, must be told in a third volume to be entitled : "The Ranch Girls at Boarding School."

The Ranch Girls Series

The first volume of this series is entitled "The Ranch Girls at Rainbow Lodge." "The Ranch Girls' Pot of Gold" is the second volume of the series. The story of the four "Ranch Girls" continues along lines of constantly increasing interest, and the change of scene accomplished in the third volume of the series, "The Ranch Girls at Boarding School," shows them in a new and strange environment. How they bring the ideals and standards of the big open West to the solution of many of their problems in this new field creates a story even more absorbingly interesting than either of its predecessors.

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